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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

September 5, 1894.

No. 828.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXIV.

Kirk King, the Man from Kirby;



"HOLD HARD, THAR, GENTS!" EXCLAIMED KIRK KING, HOLDING THE PISTOL
IN ONE HAND, AND MOVING HIS HAT WITH THE OTHER.

OR, SHORT-CARD CHARLIE At Boot Jack.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "HANDS UP,"
"THE LIGHTNING SPORT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE KID FROM KIRBY.

VANCE ULLMAN ran the stiffest game at
Boot Jack.

There were half a dozen other gaming-
houses which ran wide open, but they all
had cappers by the dozen to look after the

interests of the proprietors, and Vance lost and won in a single evening enough coin to bankrupt any two of them.

He was noted also as a bad man among the worst when it came to shooting, or any such foolishness, though he could afford to be long suffering on occasion. Of late it even took crowding to bring him up to the scratch, though no one thought any the worse of him on that account.

When a man has a record as long as the moral law, and is known to be as quick on the draw, and as deadly on the aim, as the best of his neighbors, it only takes a few exhibitions of courage to satisfy the world at large that he knows his own business, and is looking after it according to the best way.

That was Vance Ullman, all over.

As handsome as a picture and as game as a bull-dog, what he said went, according to popular opinion, and he was supposed to have Boot Jack under his heels.

That was saying a good deal, for before the advent of the proprietor of "The Tiger Saloon," a man's life was not safe anywhere. Lead flew thick of an evening, and a great deal of it went wild.

The first night he opened out Vance lined Jack Potts, and took off the tip of an ear. Then he made Jack—who was a mighty chief—hold up his hands while he laid down the law.

"Gentlemen," he remarked, after his most pleasant manner; "you can go out doors and do all the shooting you want, and I don't care where the pills fly, so they don't come my way."

"But in here I want you to understand that if you miss your man I'll mark you for it; and if you hit the wrong fellow you'll suffer for it."

And he said it so quietly, and with such a pleasant smile on his face, it was hard to tell whether it was jest or earnest until Jim Bogan lost the end of his nose when his bullet went hissing over the head of "The Sport from Denver."

One evening Vance was standing at the end of the bar in the drinking-room when through the doorway stepped a man who looked as though he might have lost his bearings, and got into the wrong pew.

He was frowzly and ragged. His boots were down to their uppers, and his hat was so disreputable no one would have suspected it had ever seen better days.

He had a thick shock of bright, red hair, while his paws were huge, and dirt-begrimed.

"Hoop-lal! Hyer we be!" he shouted, as he reeled forward.

"Ther high-heeled solligoster from 'way back. Barkeep, sot 'em up fur ther house, an' charge 'em all to ther Kid frum Kirby. You hear me, say?"

"We hear you," said Vance quietly, turning slightly, and casting a keen glance at the new-comer.

"I believe you have no assets in this bank, and we know nothing about any other. Am afraid your face is not good, unless we see sufficient collateral."

The Kid from Kirby was scarcely fighting drunk, and Ullman spoke to him after the manner of a man who supposed he was open to reason. It seemed to be kindly meant, but all the same it was a deadly warning.

"Oh-weel! Hark to ther man! Ez if I war jest a or'nary, low-down fyste, instead ov ther rarin', tearin' snappin' torkle ov ther Andes, w'ot hez a gold-mine onder his shell, an' loads ov di'munds in each pocket! Straight goods, an' no gougins, sot 'em up fur ther house, an' take ther change outen that!"

The whack with which he slapped down a twenty dollar gold-piece on the bar could be heard sharply all over the house.

"Look at it! Feast yer eyes on it, an' then, ye thirsty souls, draw near while Mister Man are settin' out ther bottles. I've counted noses in ther gang an' thar's 'nuf thar ter go 'round, an' leave me a clean leetle five over, so spread out yer glasses, an' gi'mme ther right change back."

This was somewhat different from the general invitation with which he began, and yet it amounted to the same thing. It happened there was no great crowd in the Tiger just then.

Vance gave a scarcely perceptible nod and then turned away. Business was business,

and reprobates were not entirely barred out so long as they behaved themselves. The principal question in his mind was, how many of the men of Boot Jack would be willing to drink with the stranger, though he hardly thought it would be considered a cause of war in case there was any general refusal.

With all the skill much practice had given him, the barkeeper twirled out a row of glasses which corresponded exactly in numbers to the roll of the men present, and while he was doing it the forward move began. Whether he was drunk or sober, the Kid from Kirby found very few there who would not conquer a drink at his expense.

In fact, Doc Andrews, and the man with whom he was talking, were the only ones who did not step forward. Perhaps, if they had not been so busy with their own affairs, they would have come also.

The man with the red hair scowled, and glanced over at the corner.

It looked as though he was going to give a more pointed invitation, for he made a step in that direction, but almost immediately he turned again toward the bar, and all hands lifted their glasses together.

"Good lickin' makes strong friends, an' that's gospel truth. I'm yourn ter command, an' when ary one ov yer wants a favor don't be afeared ter whisper it to ther Kid. You'll find him all thar in a heap. When I come ter perspect at Boot Jack I hit it, fust clatter. Thanks, gents all, an' now you'll see me make ther fur fly when I tackle ther great, big tiger thet lurks yander in ther jungle. It's my night on, an' I'm goin' fur all thet's in ther box."

He gathered up his change, which amounted to no great sum, dropped it carelessly in his pocket, and wheeled away without further leave-taking.

But he did not go straight to the gaming-room, as he had hinted was his intention, but swaggered across the room, and dropped heavily into a vacant chair, near to and almost facing Doc Andrews.

"Evenin', Doc. Glad ter see you've tied up on ther booze. At your time ov life one can't kerry ez much ez he used to could, an' when you do git a load on—great snakes!"

Next to Vance Ullman the doctor was the best dressed man in the room, and though they had never come together in any armed discussion, some thought his record was a shade the better. He looked coldly up, and slowly replied:

"Excuse me, sir. I have no acquaintance with you, and have no time for an introduction. You had better confine your remarks to your friends."

"Friends? Good thunder! Ef you ain't a friend whar will I look fur one? Why, Doc, I knowed you frum 'wayback, an' ther more I knowed ye ther more I loved yer. Why, ef thar war a man on airth ter whom you could go with a sure heart fur backin' it would be to ther Kid frum Kirby. An' you ter say you didn't know me! It cuts me clean to the heart. Don't say yer disremember er it'll make me want ter die, right now."

"You'll die right now whether you want to or not, if you don't vamose the vicinity," said the doctor, harshly, his hand dropping swiftly toward his hip.

"Move yourself, and that mighty sudden."

"A-b-l-e. You spell it ef you kin. Why, Doc, I got you lined, an' when you pull I'll plug. Thar ain't ary coroner's jury ever sot in Aryzona ez wouldn't bring it in a clean case ov susanside. Don't keep me waitin', but show yer hand or throw to ther middle."

The doctor looked a little closer, and learned something. The one hand of the Kid from Kirby was hidden from view in the depths of a capacious pocket, and after such a warning it was safe to believe it was holding a weapon. If appearances went for anything the stranger held the drop.

"After finding me a corpse the rest of the findings of the jury wouldn't interest me a bit," was the cool reply of the doctor.

"If it is all the same to you I'll throw up my hands, and pass out. But I wish the Tiger joy of its new patron. If this thing keeps on he'll have the place all to himself in a week."

"That's good enough. Ef you won't shake I kin rub me own paw an' then scratch yer name frum ther roll."

"Scratch and be hanged to you. But look out for the next time."

It was a way the doctor had, and it made him all the more dangerous. Perhaps he wasn't dead game; but all the same, the few who heard the compressed wrath he managed to crowd into his tones felt pretty well assured that Andrews meant to shoot the stranger on sight if they met again.

At any rate, he waited for no answer but gathered himself up and strode out.

The Kid from Kirby looked around with a puzzled smile, and then, without paying any attention to the comments which he might have heard for the opening of his ears, stalked away to where, in the other room, the game was just opening, with Vance Ullman behind the table.

"Five dollars wu'th ov chips, an' make 'em small. I'll feed ther tiger spratts awhile afore I give him a chance ter nibble at a whale."

Even yet it was not too late to bar out the man with the red hair—of course running the risk of a kick which would be more vigorous than elegant, but again a nod from Vance Ullman settled the question, and the Kid began to place his shoestrings with as much style as the Sport from Denver, who came into the game just behind him, and seemed bent on playing for big money.

Loud as was the style put on by the stranger when he made his advent at The Tiger he played his game coolly enough when he got down to actual business.

If anything, he was too cool.

Some of the bystanders began to think he was playing a part as well as a game, and that the ragged coat he wore was not the best one he had to his back.

Whatever Ullman may have thought he said and showed nothing, but went on pulling the cards, though after a little chopping sort of luck the stranger settled down into a steady winner.

And with each winning the amount of his next bet was doubled, until finally, as he drew over a cool hundred, he suddenly asked:

"What's ther limit?"

"The bank," was Ullman's cold answer.

"Then, dog my cats ef I don't play it—when I win ther coin ter try ther rifle."

CHAPTER II.

WON ON THE TURN.

THE exclamation of the stranger raised a little laugh.

So far he had shown no capital beyond the five dollars originally placed upon the table, and as long as he was on velvet he well might make such a threat without showing any great amount of nerve.

It hardly seemed possible such a streak of luck should continue to the end without a single break; and a break meant to start at the beginning again. There were still a few more chips at the elbow of the Kid from Kirby, but the bulk of his capital seemed to be on the lay-out.

"Me an' Vance kin smile, but I don't see ez you outsiders hez ary call ter laugh," grumbled the stranger, as he shoved the hundred across to the ace.

"Ett takes time when yer begins small, but stiddy goes. Ef yer know when ther run changes ye'r bound to win, an' a feller kin stand up to this sorter work fur a blamed long while. I'll button that pile down with er copper, an' when it comes up ag'in it'll be twice ez big."

Sure enough, the ace came out on the side of the bank, and the Kid had won again.

"We'll roll ther old cheryot along," he snorted as he pushed the doubled bet on the king and returned the copper to his little stock of chips in reserve.

The shoestring had become something bigger than an anaconda, and the looks of the Kid no longer excited any interest or amusement. His game was the grand attraction now.

Vance Ullman might have been a wooden man for all the interest he evinced. His fingers manipulated the cards with the steady dexterity of a machine.

Now and then, when the bettors seemed a little slow, he spoke the stereotyped phrases, "Make your game, gentlemen. The deuce is in the door, and the bank is the flyer."

It might have been an automaton from which the sound proceeded, for all the expression of tone or face; yet there was no one there, unless it was the party who claimed to hail from Kirby, who did not know there was not a move made around the table which was not taken in by those steel-gray eyes.

The Sport from Denver had been playing small stakes, in rather a listless manner. Outwardly, he gave the stranger no more attention than did the imperturbable dealer on the other side of the table; but now and then cast at him a swift glance from the corner of his eyes. The stranger puzzled even him; and there was no better judge of his fellow mortals, young though he was, than this same Sport from Denver—or Short Card Charlie, as he was frequently called. Charles Turner was his address for the post-office, but that cut no sort of figure among the boys.

"I've seen that sort of hog-luck last for a week, and by the blazes I believe it has come to him to stay!" was his exclamation as once more the stranger won.

"Say, sport, if you have no objection I wouldn't mind taking a bite out of your judgment. Between us I believe we can bust the bank wide open, but I don't want to try it if you'd sooner carry the contract alone."

"Ef you be clean gone broke, don't mind ter give yer a stake," was the careless answer, without a look in his direction.

"Ef I do I'll draw out tell you kin try yer hand. I wouldn't keer ter buckag'in' a hoo-doo, ef I hed a streak ez wide ez all outdoors. But I don't give my jedgment 'thout a interest in ther proceeds; an' I'll lose money at that. I got ther hull bank ez good ez corralled, an' what you git I'll lose."

It looked as though what he said was not altogether an idle boast, since at that moment he was once more a winner.

The sport laughed and shrugged his shoulders as he answered:

"You drive a hard bargain, but it's better than none at all. Halves—till you lose. After that I'll play my own game, for there won't be much left of your luck to gamble on."

As he spoke he shoved over a hundred by the side of the Kid's pile, and awaited the result without any apparent anxiety.

There was one thing the bargain did do, and perhaps the stranger understood it.

When the Sport from Denver took any one under his wing that party was supposed to be free of the town so long as any interference was not brought on by himself.

At any rate, the partners won; and on the instant the grimy paw of the Kid was stretched over toward the sport.

"Divvy ez we go along. Then, ef I hev ter leave in a hurry thar won't be no delay getherin' up ther loose ends. Half, ef you please—an' I'll put it up on ther lucky nine long with my leetle pile."

The face of the sport remained clear, and a little laugh was permitted. It made some difference in the size of his bet—and the size of his winnings, when, certain as fate the nine came along on his side of the piles.

"And now you have it!" exclaimed the Kid, jubilation in his tones.

"Hyer's ther last turn in ther box, an' when yer sees them come out ace, four an' jack, an' pard over thar payin' four ter one, you'll see a pile that it's good ter sit down with."

"And where, oh, where will I come in at?" ruefully exclaimed the Sport from Denver.

"Vance calls the size of his bank ten thousand, and you have it as good as closed. But it's just so. A man must have a long spoon to sup with the devil, and it looks as though I can't get even a finger in the pot. Say, Ullman, won't you let me pile it up on you for a couple thousand extra to-night? I want to win or lose something after such a bargain."

"Drop your money on the board and I'll see you don't lose if you win. May as well play this streak now as any other time."

No one else had cared, or perhaps dared, to follow the lead of the adventurous stran-

ger, and all the money and chips on the table belonged to the two who had opened up such a one-sided partnership.

For Charlie had thrown down a thick roll of notes, which from the big figures on the ends visible certainly equaled in value the sum stated.

It would not take long to decide the fate of the venture, and there were only a few seconds of breathless silence while the two cards were slowly and steadily drawn.

When the ace appeared there was a subdued hum; but when the four appeared in the door the feelings of the audience could be restrained no longer. There was a general shout of, "The Kid wins!"

And in the midst of the confusion the stranger stood with immutable face, working his fingers suggestively as he leaned over and whispered in slightly husky tones, "Cash in."

"It's just as good as wheat, old man!" exclaimed the sport, as he gave the Kid a resounding slap on the back.

"For your sake I'm mighty glad I won. Don't hurry Vance, because while he's counting it all up you will be taking a drink with me and the house. You can't most always sometimes tell by a man's looks, and I'll swear high that you're a heap sight better than yours."

"Thankee, sport, but I'll salt down me plunder afore I git on ther oh-be-joyful. I might furgit ter come back fur ther load tell after ther shop hed moved, but ef I once git froze on to it all blazes can't make me drop it whar it won't be doin' ther most good."

"Game closed; players cash in," was the cold announcement of Vance, without so much as a glance at the winners, and he swung through the crowd with the same careless grace he had shown when he cleaned up fifteen thousand to the good after an all-night struggle with Colonel Bangor, the poker magnate of Magic City.

Johnny Tombs, the cashier, needed no further instructions as to how he was to do his duty, and before he turned to the bar the pockets of the Kid from Kirby were bulging with financial fatness.

"Don't be loud, old fellow," whispered the Sport from Denver, as he leaned over the Kid's shoulders.

"Vance is just as square a man as they make them, and as long as you don't go over the chalk marks he has on the floor there's no danger he will come back at you; but if you make a racket he'll have a funeral if he has to call on all his heelers to help him. And he has never done that yet, though I have seen him at work with a merry sort of a gang, that shot remarkably close."

"You see ary thing emerald in ther eye ov ther Kid frum Kirby?" was the response, given with a leer, and a pat of the pocket which held the most dollars.

"I kim in a ragged old bloat, which hed jest found a twenty-dollar shiner an' war bound ter hev ther wu'th ov it ef I died agittin' it."

"I go out ov ther Tiger a man ov means, a buddin' millionaire. We'll hev those drinks, but after that—excuse me. I'm a gent ov wealth, an' must be a-lookin' after me property. To-morrer, I'll buy a mine; an' next week run fur ther U. S. Senate."

The sport shrugged his shoulders, and then led the way.

He did not feel the least call to doubt the truth of the explanation nor did it trouble him in the least.

The Kid had money now, even if, a few hours before, there was not coin enough in his pockets to pay for supper and night's lodging. Perhaps, in the way of business, it would find its way into Turner's pockets, and if so it would be none the less a legal tender for having gone through the hands of a vagabond and a tramp.

And on second thought Turner was not convinced that the Kid from Kirby was either of these.

Several rounds of drinks followed, at the expense of the successful gamblers, and then the stranger, who by this time was beginning to be pretty well known, prepared to go.

"So long, boys. Sorry ter leave yer but I got business in ther mornin' an' must be gittin' ready fur it ter-night. Ef ary inquirin' friend comes snookin' 'round, tell

'em I said I'd be 'round ter-morrer, an' ef they kin pay their bill they better wait."

And a wonderfully changed man did he seem to be as he stalked out of the doorway through which, scarce an hour ago he had stumbled.

"Reckon they'll take me in at the Lion Hotel fur ther night ef I show me pewter; an' to-morrer, when I'm all dressed up, they'll be glad enough ter keep me. I'll try it an' see."

So he thought to himself; and glancing around to get his bearings he struck off in the direction of the Lion.

At this time the streets of Boot Jack—under another name—are well lighted; but in those days, on a dark night, between the saloon lights they were hideous with blackness. The task of navigation which the man had set for himself was by no means an easy one, and before he had gone far he began to think he had become bewildered, for it looked as though he had left the town behind him.

Then, there was the sound of following footsteps, close at hand, and before he could turn, a crushing blow was aimed at his unprotected head, while a long shaft of light shot from the suddenly opened slide of a dark lantern.

CHAPTER III.

THE GIRL ON THE LEDGE.

THE Kid from Kirby was no novice in such matters, and instinct served him well in the pinch.

One arm he cast upward, defending his head as well as he was able, but that guard would have come too late had he not at the same time closed the joints of his knees, and as it were shut himself up.

In this way it happened that the force of the blow fell upon the hollow of his hand, forcing back that member upon the crown of his head, but doing no great damage.

Before the weapon could be withdrawn his fingers closed upon it, and then he was up and doing.

He wrenched the club away from the man who held it, and bounding lightly to one side, cast it straight at the lantern.

There was a jingle of breaking glass, and a hoarse curse, as the light was extinguished, and then he was striking out, left and right, at the shadowy forms he could dimly see around him.

They had evidently anticipated an easy victory, and were not prepared for such a prompt and vigorous defense. There was a prize in his pockets worth the fighting for, and if there had been half a chance no doubt they would have done their very best to win it; but the stranger hit quick, and he hit hard. Whenever he struck a blow a man went down. In as brief a time as it takes to tell it he had vanquished the enemy, and that without receiving any damage himself.

With the work in hand completed the Kid did not wait for the chance to do it all over again. He gave one look about him and saw where the lights of Boot Jack were twinkling, and then hastened away at a pace that took him rapidly from the spot. By the time the roughs had staggered to their feet and gathered their wits sufficiently about them to be ready for a renewal of the fray their intended victim was stepping into the Lion Hotel.

The fame of his exploits at the saloon had preceded him, and he was received with a great deal more cordiality than he had expected. For the first time in a long while he enjoyed the luxury of a fairly good bed, and though as a matter of precaution he placed his fortune under his pillow, and laid a serviceable-looking revolver alongside of it, his slumbers were not disturbed. When morning came he was wide awake, and ready for business.

Wealth had an ameliorating effect on him. He scrubbed his face until it shone again, brushed off the dirt from his clothing, and combed his rebellious locks till they gave some show of decency and order.

Then, he made his way to the breakfast table, and found Charlie Turner occupied a chair immediately opposite to him.

The little gambler was not too proud to own acquaintanceship, and nodded genially

at the meeting, but there was very little said until the labors of the table were practically over.

Then, it was the Sport from Denver who opened the conversation.

"You got here all right, I reckon. After you had gone it struck me it would have been just as well if I had offered to walk this way myself. Folks think there is a gang around Boot Jack, and I shouldn't wonder if there was. Now and then they find a man with his pockets turned inside out. It never happens unless the job is worth the doing, and if they had struck you last night they would have made a rich haul."

"Yer level right; but it happened the other way. I struck them; an' after that thar war nothin' ter be said. It war fun amazin' ter hear 'em drap. Too dark ter see, but I could jest imagine."

"Hello! So they did go for you, after all. It's the first time on record where they failed to make the raffle when they tried it on. And you didn't get a sight at them? Pity, that. How did the thing go?"

Without much waste of words the Kid related his little adventure, which was listened to with a great deal of interest if looks went for anything.

"I guess you are of full age and able to take care of yourself," was the laughing remark of the sport as the history closed.

"That turned out all right, but keep an eye peeled that they don't come back on you to get even for the thumping. They will have it into their fool heads you can't shoot because you didn't draw."

"Which are whar they'll git left, bad. I'm jest a leetle bashful in a strange place, but I don't allow no galoot kin git ther drop on me, an' when I do cut loose—go 'way snakes!"

"Good thing to keep that in view, for you will like as not have several chances to put it in practice. For a new man you did seem to manage to stir up the high and mighty with a good, long pole. Vance is all right if you don't rile him up; but what ever sent you to bucking against the doctor when there wa'n't a cent to be made by it?"

"Oh, I didn't like ther looks ov his collar, an' I knowed we'd hev ter hev it sum day, so I th'ort I might ez well git ther bulge on him at ther jump off, an' sorter take his measure."

"Well, you didn't get it, by a long chalk, if you think that is the way he usually performs."

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no, but I'll be lookin' out fur him now, an' ef I hedn't let him know I war around he might hev found me some day when I warn't lookin' fur him. This way, you bet, I'll be keepin' both eyes open, an' ther drop all ready."

Charlie looked at him sharply.

"For a stranger in the gates I swear you are piling it up a little more rapid than most men would think was good for health. Vance Ullman will hardly be your friend, the doctor will be your foe, and the Rounders, who had the little scrap with you last night, will be apt to camp right down on your trail. 'Pears to me you didn't leave yourself much room to make friends in. Pretty much all of Boot Jack belongs one place or the other. There are only a few of us sports who go as we please, and have enough to do, fighting things out among ourselves, without taking up for a stranger. Don't you think it would be a good move to go on to the next town?"

"Thankee, pard. You mean well, but I don't see it in those lamps. When I strike my lodge poles I generally stay right where I set 'em up ag'in tell I make or break. Ov late I been most frequent doin' ther latter, but Boot Jack seems to offer a openin', an' I'll w'uk it fur what it's w'uth."

"All right, old man. I thought it would be friendly to give you a sort of warning how the land lay. I can't say but what I like your pluck, though I can't swear to admiring your judgment. If you last long enough, perhaps I'll see you later. So long."

The Sport from Denver had no great desire to promenade the town arm-in-arm with the new arrival, and nodding jauntily slid away about his business, while the Kid finished the meal at his leisure.

Turner was the only man who spoke to

him at the table, and when he went swaggering out into what was called the office, the few men there gave him a cold nod or two, while Billy Johnson, who looked after the Register, leaned over the counter with a pen in his hand and a dubious sort of a smile on his face as he remarked:

"We didn't get your name last night, and, if you please, will you put it right there. We'll try each other for a week—cash in advance, according to our regular custom—and if all things are serene, then we'll hope to count you in regular for the Lion."

The Kid from Kirby did not seem at all surprised at the double-headed request, and taking the pen, signed, in a bold and rather sprawling hand:

"KIRK KING, THE KID FROM KIRBY."

Then he paid his bill for the week, and for the present was free of the house.

He waited for no further remarks, however, but strolled on out into the street, where he stood for a moment as though undecided, and then struck off at a long, swinging pace, which soon carried him out of the town.

The trail soon took a turn upward, and he followed it like one who, without having any very intimate acquaintance with it, knew where he was going.

Finally, the trail grew narrow, and wound around a perpendicular bluff, which towered a hundred feet or more above his head, and as it trended upward at every step it was not long before the precipice at his left began to assume a formidable height. Clinging to the side of the rock, the path was only passable for horsemen, or persons on foot, and was really none too safe for them.

"An elegant place fur a lay-out," he thought, as he glanced over at the abyss.

"It ain't likely a flood will ever ketch 'em up hyer, but it would be dog-goned on healthy ter git ther habit ov walkin' in a feller's sleep. Wonder ef I'll find ther boss at home?"

A light thud almost at his feet caused him to look down first, and then up.

Some one had cast a pebble from above, and he heard a low chuckle at the suddenness with which he had been aroused from something like a reverie.

"Ye'r thar, are ye, Little Mischief? Reckon you war lookin' fur me."

The person called "Little Mischief" stood on a ledge that was fully twenty feet above the trail, and so narrow it looked almost impossible to retain a footing on it.

Yet she stood there fearlessly, though it seemed as if a misstep must mean certain death.

"She" was a girl just verging on womanhood, and missed little of being a beauty.

Her eyes were a blue so deep that at a little distance they seemed black, and her hair, which hung over her shoulders in a tangled mass of curls, was a dark chestnut. She was dainty of feature and limb, but face and figure gave promise of the rare development which was soon to come.

"Can't say that I was looking for you, and I am sure I didn't want to see you, for it strikes me you are what they call bad medicine. Have you lost your grub stake, and come back to get another one? Because, if you have, you can take yourself off again. That was the last in the box, and if we don't have an extra good streak soon, dad and I can go starve."

"Not quite so bad ez that, little woman. Thar's meal in ther sack, an' bacon behind ther door, an' it won't run short while ther Kid from Kirby knows how ter rustle fur bread an' meat. Is ther old man up at ther shanty?"

What answer she would have given remained unspoken, for suddenly there was a dull report, and the girl threw up her hands and dropped downward from the ledge.

It was all so sudden that the Kid from Kirby might well be pardoned for being taken unawares. There was just time for him to think it was certain death for both of them, and then he spread out his arms, and braced himself for the almost instantaneous shock.

CHAPTER IV.

A FEMINE MYSTERY.

MIRIAM CATHCART would have been a belle anywhere, so it is not an altogether idle com-

pliment to say she was the handsomest woman in Boot Jack.

The town was more highly favored than the most of frontier camps, for half a dozen of the responsible citizens of the place had their wives and daughters there, and more than one of them would have attracted attention in Eastern circles.

But Miss Miriam was neither a wife nor a daughter of any resident of the place, so far as known, but for some weeks had been boarding at the Lion, and quietly pursuing a quest about which the average citizen had found out very little.

In the line of business she had interviewed, and was willing to interview, all sorts of characters, but about her acquaintances and friends she was known to be "choicely."

Among her friends however, she seemed to number Doc Andrews.

Some trifling ailment, when she first came, had caused them to meet, and when he was done calling professionally he continued his visits without objection.

If the doctor was at all rattled by his interview with the Kid from Kirby he did not show it when he called on Miss Miriam, a half hour later.

It was not a formal call, either.

He had the run of the house, although he only took an occasional meal there; and he seemed to be wandering aimlessly through a room which served as parlor and waiting-room, when he met her.

"Another stranger in the town," was his casual remark, as he took off the hat which up to that minute he had carelessly allowed to remain on his head.

"He hardly looks like a man it would be worth your while to see; but, who knows?"

"You had no talk with him, then, I suppose?"

"Very little, and what there was of it hardly was the style I would care to repeat. You might think it did not redound to my credit."

He laughed as he spoke, and yet there was something about the laugh which said the remembrance of the conversation was not altogether pleasant.

"He certainly did not get very far into your good graces—is he still living?"

"He is, though I am not sure he ought to be. Whether he will continue to draw breath will depend somewhat, or a great deal, on the result of our next meeting. *Ad interim*, I thought if you wanted to speak with him you might as well be hunting him up."

"There must be something promising in his appearance or you would not have been so considerate. Thank you. I will try and see him in the morning. What is his name?"

"Probably he has none he would care to own until he reaches some land where sheriffs never come. So far, he is known only by the self-announced title of 'the Kid from Kirby.' I left him at the Tiger. If he has good luck there, he will probably gravitate this way before morning. It is just as likely though, that he will get himself perforated, and be ready to make the journey to the hill at daybreak."

"Thanks for telling me, and I will try to look him up, since I am sure you must have reason to believe it may be worth my while."

"Even that is a little stronger than I would be willing to put it. He looks like an old timer, who has been the rounds. That is all I can say for him. In the course of his wanderings he may have stumbled across one Hugh Cathcart, or heard something in regard to him."

"But you did not care to ask him?"

"Frankly, no. He looks like a man who would answer a lady freely and frankly, but would be mum as a clam to a man. At the same time, I would not advise you to put too much faith in anything he may say, provided you have an interview. These fellows can invent the most extraordinary yarns on the very smallest provocations, and give them such an air of plausibility as to deceive the Old Boy himself. I am really curious to know what answer he will give you in case you meet."

"You shall know; and, oh, if he should be able to put me on the right track, I shall never forget the generous friend who has given me such substantial aid and encouragement."

There was no more jest in her tones as she spoke, and the bow of the doctor as he received this promise, was grave and even solemn. Perhaps he was discounting the intelligence he expected she might receive.

"I know you believe there is no hope, but I cannot bring myself to that view. It cannot, must not be, and I will never give over the search while life lasts and I am able to drag one foot after another, over the seemingly hopeless trail."

"Hopeless it is, if I must tell the truth. Of that fact no one can judge better than myself. Over all the region named by you I have had men searching for traces of Hugh Cathcart. All the answers save one were alike. No such person had ever been known there."

"And that one?"

Breathlessly she asked the question, and then turned away as though expecting to receive a blow.

"No such name had he ever heard; but there was a man who, in some sort, answered the description. He went South with a party—and every man of that outfit is believed to have died on the trail."

"Then, Hugh was not of the party. I will not believe it, even though one who swore to being a survivor should tell it. And yet—where was the outfit seen? Which way did they go? I must know more, if I have to follow the same trail myself."

She spoke with some excitement, and yet there was a coolness of purpose behind it all which told she was uttering no idle boast.

"Whither they were bound was unknown, except that they were turned Southward. They may have been bound for Mexico; they may have been bent on prospecting some of the mountain fastnesses which have so long been a delusion and a snare. They are like a few grains of sand on the desert, a few drops of water in the ocean. They have been swallowed up, and only by chance will they ever be found again."

"I will be that chance, then. Through me fate will work out its strange ends."

"I do not think you fully realize what it is you are rashly vowing to undertake. It is a task far beyond your strength. I hesitated to tell you what little I had heard for fear it might awaken some vain hope. Had I known the wild scheme it seems to have engendered I should certainly have kept it all myself."

"And earned an everlasting hate had I once learned the truth—as some day I should have done. I have all along felt I was making no mistake when I gave you my confidence, and now I am more certain than ever. Thanks a thousand times. I have at last found something tangible, something from which to take a second departure. At last, I know which way to turn if I would be doing something. And that is better than the forced inaction of the past weeks. Where is this man to be found, and who was he? I must see him myself; must be certain there is no little detail wanting from his story, which might throw some light on this dark mystery of my life."

"I am afraid you are destined to be balked at every step. The man was a resident of Gordon's Gulch, but he left there the very day he told his story to my informant. His name I did not learn. Had the news been as favorable as it was the other way I would have been thankful for even as much as I got."

"Then, to Gordon's Gulch I will go. It cannot be a worse place than this."

"It may be a great deal worse. There, you have your friends all to make, while here—you know there is at least one who would die for you. If you must know more, trust the matter in my hands. If need be I will start to-morrow."

"Hush! No more of that. I cannot, must not hear it. It is my work, and I will allow no one to share it unless it is as a paid servitor."

"But, after my humble fashion, I have been sincerely striving to share it with you in the past, and if you will give me the right to do so, will be only too glad to make it the work of my life in the future; at least, until an ending of the search is reached."

"What! Again. It shows how little I can trust you. Go, now. Such words from you to me, after what I have told you, are little if anything less than an insult."

Her anger was very real, and his penitence seem deep and true.

"Pardon me this one more time, and I will leave it in your hands to say when I may speak again."

"I will try to forgive you, but you must leave me now. To-morrow morning I will try and see you, and without a doubt I will be on the way to the Gulch before night."

"I will accept my dismissal for the present, and perhaps by to-morrow you will be able to look at things in a different light. Forgive me if I have offended. Good-night."

He spoke a little sadly, and yet with an air of offended dignity which he intended her to remember. The doctor was not altogether unlearned as to the hearts of women, and he saw it was time to end the interview.

Miriam Cathcart offered no objection to his going, and if the doctor had known how little he entered into her thoughts that night he might have been ready to admit his case was as hopeless as it seemed.

CHAPTER V.

A DANGEROUS EXPLORATION.

It was near to daybreak when Miriam actually fell asleep, and that probably accounted for the fact that she was the last of the boarders at the Lion to come to her breakfast.

She was somewhat calmer now, and ate with something like relish. By reason of thinking all night that things ought to be after a certain fashion she had almost come to believe they must be so.

For that reason she was calmly getting herself ready for the work before her, and not a soul would have read in her face the resolves she had just been making.

She had not forgotten the announcement with which the doctor had opened the conversation the night before. Billy Johnson was to a certain extent in her confidences, and to him she turned after completing the meal.

"The Kid from Kirby? Why, bless my soul, yes. Here's his name on the register, and if you had been an hour sooner you would have had a chance to see him in all his glory. He turned things upside down at the Tiger last night, and we corralled a week in advance from him this morning before he went out to graze. When he comes back I'll let you know, and send him into the parlor if he's sober. He looks like a man who has been the rounds, and would tell you all he knew for the asking of it."

From force of habit he turned the register around, and put his fore finger on the last name written there.

The eyes of Miriam followed the pointing index until she had made out what was written. Then, she uttered a cry of delight.

"Oh, it cannot be; and yet it must. Kirk King! I know that name. I have seen it a dozen times before, in Hugh's letters. It is the man above all others I wish to see. You are sure he will return?"

"Just as sure as one can be of anything under a flush royal. Boot Jack has treated him too well for him to sour on it straight off. But right when he will come I ain't so certain. I don't know the nature of the beast, you understand. He may come in like a judge, with the fresh glory of a plug hat and a b'iled shirt; or, he may come howling drunk, with all the rag-tag and bobtail of the town at his heels. These rough and ready sports are mighty uncertain about their style, and it's just as the fancy hits them."

"Then, I had better find him at once, and make sure. Thank you, a thousand times, and if he don't lead me too questionable a dance I think I will look for him myself."

"Oh, hold on! don't do that. I can send a boy out."

"Thanks again, but I won't put you to the trouble. And, besides, he might suspect a trick, or something of that kind, and not come at all. Better go and prospect myself."

She was not so anxious now to get to Gordon's Gulch. She doubted not that she was on as good a trail, and it was one nearer to hand. In a few minutes she glided out of the Lion, equipped for the street, and fol-

lowed the direction supposed to have been taken by the Kid from Kirby.

It was not until fairly started that she realized the delicacy of the undertaking.

This was evidently not the Kirk King of Hugh Cathcart's letters, even though it might be the same person. He seemed to have strangely deteriorated, if the testimony of the doctor and Billy Johnson was to be believed.

However, it might be possible to locate him, and after that it would be time to devise means for drawing him out without actually herself entering one of the dens in which he might have found refuge.

If he was in a place of standard reputation, like the Tiger Saloon, the task would not present much difficulty.

But though she glanced to the right and left as she made her way down the street, nothing did she see of any stranger who answered the description she had received of the Kid from Kirby.

The saloon doors were all open, and for the most part the bars were in sight, but the few loungers belonged to the same old stock, with which she had gradually become familiar during her stay in the town.

As there was practically but one street in Boot Jack, for all the places of business were gathered on the main avenue, it was not hard to complete the inspection, and she might have returned to the hotel quite discouraged had it not been for a chance remark, overheard when she had nearly reached the end of town.

"Reckon he's gone up on ther hill, yonder, ter look ther landscape o'er. After ther way he piled things up at ther Tiger last night he'll think he owns all outdoors, an' he may be wantin' ter see how much ov ther earth he kin afford ter give away."

"Give away nothin'," retorted another.

"He ain't that kind. He'll git all he kin, an' keep all he gits. Bet yer he's gone ter take a look at ther Copper Bottom claim. Ef he buys inter that he'll whoop it up fur the doctor, an' them as owns ther Oriental. Thar's bin some janglin' heretofore, but ef he gits inter it thar will be perfect war, an' don't yer furgit it."

These words seemed to apply to none other than the Kid from Kirby, and sundry looks made it certain in which way he had gone.

Miriam was a good pedestrian, and had frequently taken long walks unattended save by the revolver she always carried. Though the speakers saw her as she passed they thought nothing of it when she continued her stroll in the direction indicated by their talk, and finally passed out of sight, over the crest of the rise in front of them.

When she had reached a spot where she could command a further view of the trail, she saw in the distance a man striding along, and as well as she could make out he looked like the object of her search.

It was, in fact, Kirk King. As she followed him with her eyes he turned aside from the broader route he had been pursuing, and began the ascent of a narrow path.

He walked like a man who had no present intention of stopping, and Miriam began to doubt the utility of following him further. She knew he had left the road which led to the Copper Bottom claim, or mine, and it looked as though he might be bent on a prospecting tour somewhere among the hills and gulches in the direction taken.

To follow further seemed of no use; he was too far away to call to; and the chances of success were too uncertain to attempt to overtake him by running. She decided to walk on until the branch from the road was reached, and then, if the case did not look more hopeful, to return to the hotel, and wait for his reappearance.

Of one thing she was certain. She would not start for Gordon's Gulch that day.

There were several hundred yards to cover before reaching what she had decided should be the limit of her stroll, and in that time she had the first opportunity for the day to think of Doctor Andrews, and what he had offered her the previous evening.

It was not the first time the doctor had more than verged on the sentimental, and she began to study how she should make it the last without altogether dropping him from her standing list of friends.

He had been so kind and helpful to her in her quest, he had been so earnest and yet so modest in his suit, that she could not help but have more than ordinary warmth in her friendly feeling for him; but she knew he could only be a friend, and nothing more.

She had promised to see him that morning; but now was sorry for it, because she wanted to see Kirk King first of all. What the latter would have to say might direct all her movements, or bring this search to an end altogether.

She inwardly decided that on reaching the Lion again she would confess and avoid. In other words, she would send an indefinite sort of note, excusing herself from the engagement for the present.

Thinking all this over she turned involuntarily into the side path, and followed it for some little distance before looking up to note her surroundings.

The track led directly upward until it was lost against the sky, appearing to go, right on into nothingness.

This could not be so, since Kirk King had gone on before, and it struck her at once it had only bent around the side of the cliff.

Curiosity urged her forward, while common sense told her she might as well stop and retrace her steps.

While she hesitated she heard the distant report of a gun.

It was no strange sound to hear, and yet it startled her. The Kid from Kirby was in that direction, and it might mean danger or death to him. Without any great amount of belief that anything serious had happened, or that she could be of any great assistance if there had, she hastened forward, though in cooler moments she might have hesitated to explore the somewhat dangerous path before her.

And then, scrambling down over the steep face of the cliff, more like a monkey than a man, came a strange figure, that would have looked more wild beast than human had it not been for the gun it carried, and which leaped lightly into the path immediately before her.

CHAPTER VI.

NEWS AT LAST.

THE Kid from Kirby had a quick eye and a strong arm, and it was well for him, and well for the girl, that he had both.

It would require wonderful skill or superhuman luck to prevent both of them dropping over the precipice; and even an unbroken fall to the narrow trail on which he stood must of itself amount to her almost certain death.

The suspense could be measured by seconds only.

The Kid eased himself from the shock as he caught her firmly in his arms, swayed stoutly inward, and the two came down together, but at a safe distance from the edge.

For an instant both lay motionless.

Then, Kirk King staggered to his feet, and as he rose his revolver came out, and he peered around as well as he could with his blurring sight, in search of whoever it was had fired the craven shot.

As far as he could make out there was no one in view, and in the glance about him he realized the spot could hardly be in range of the assassin, who was no doubt shut off by the overhanging walls.

Once certain that he was safe from attack and his attention was turned to the girl.

Unless badly wounded before falling he was sure she was unharmed, though she might have fainted from fright. As he stooped over her he saw the faint line of something like a scratch upon her neck, and was reassured. It was only a graze, and not a very bad one, after all.

He raised her head from the ground where it had rested, and carefully pressed a flask to her lips, only allowing a few drops of the liquid contents to fall between her half-parted lips.

He did this several times, meanwhile chafing her wrists and temples, and narrowly watching her face for signs of returning consciousness.

Before long they were visible.

The vanished color returned, and her eyes opened.

The first thing she saw was the homely face of Kirk King, as he bent over her, and

an instant later she realized she was resting in his arms.

The position certainly had no charms, and she drew herself away with an angry sniff, propping her back against the rock, while she stared at him in uncertain disgust.

Then, she remembered, and shot a glance upward in search of the ledge from which she had fallen, and from there her gaze roved along the face of the cliffs until it ended at the blue sky which marked their trace-line.

She gave her head a shake of weary disgust.

"I saw him," she whispered, more to herself than to her only auditor.

"He was taking a resting aim, and I don't see how he came to miss. At that distance I wouldn't have done it."

Her hand went up to her neck as she ceased speaking, for she had just felt the slight sting of the graze, and was hardly able to comprehend exactly how badly she was hurt.

"Don't worry, leetle woman; it's only a flea-bite, and won't spile yer beauty. But ef I could 'a' got a sight at him when he was pullin' trigger, you bet I'd held a heap sight straighter. Who was he?"

"Crazy Coon, if it was not his ghost. I thought he was dead. Who could have imagined he would shoot at me? And if—"

She came to a full stop, and looked around more dazed than ever. For the first time she fully realized that she had faced another danger as deadly as the bullet of Crazy Coon.

"Does seem kinder queer," said King, reassuringly.

He saw she was beginning to comprehend it was a double danger from which she had escaped, and could understand the return shock the knowledge would give her.

"Never mind that, though. Scramble up and see whether you are hurt. I don't believe you are, an' ef you ain't thar's no time fur foolishness. I want ter see ther old man soon ez I kin."

"The old man, as you call him, can wait. Do you think I am worse than I look that I cannot show common gratitude? I'll take back more than half I have said against you. You saved my life."

"Looks kinder that way," answered the Kid, with a glance upward to the spot from which she had fallen.

"But thar's no call ter faint over it. You wouldn't 'a' hed me do ther other thing?"

"Scarcely, for I'm not tired of life yet, by a long ways. And I'm not going to faint, either. I'm just going to thank you ever so much; and if the chance ever comes to do it, I'll repay the favor with compound interest. You are sure you are not hurt yourself?"

"Dead sure. When a butterfly came flutterin' down an' lit on my thumb, I jest laughed an' flung it up in ther air ter take wing ag'in."

"A pretty solid butterfly! I can't believe you altogether, and yet, it must be so. Why, when I had fallen twenty-five or thirty feet I must have weighed a ton. What sort of Hercules can you be?"

"Ask the old man. He can tell you better than I. He knows me of old, and he believes in me. If he hadn't he wouldn't have given me his last shiner for a grub stake, knowin' jest how I'd invest it. But I want ter make up my accounts with him, an' git back ter business. Now that I've struck a streak I'll work Boot Jack fur what it's w'uth, an' ef I don't turn it inside out I want ter know why not."

"Come, then. He can thank you better than I, and you will let him do it, too."

In spite of what he had said, Kirk King had not been altogether unscathed, and it was as well he had been allowed time in which to recover. He was almost himself again by this, and was about to lead the way when a sudden shadow, and the slight sound of a low footfall, caused him to turn suddenly, his hand to his hip.

If he was looking for the Crazy Coon of whom the girl-woman had spoken he was as much disappointed as he was surprised, since the breathless person who fluttered forward was a young woman.

Of course, the young woman was Miriam Cathcart. She came in haste, and if she had looked terrified there would have been nothing strange about it.

The queer looking being who had leaped into the path in front of her, and barred her upward way, caught suddenly at her wrist with his long, bony fingers, and as she drew her right hand away they settled on her left, while he bent forward and stared into her face.

Miriam knew without telling that the person before her was a lunatic, but she did not altogether lose her courage and presence of mind.

Her right hand was free, and it darted to her bosom in search of the weapon she always carried there.

Few sane men would have overlooked the motion, but it passed unheeded.

"Not her, not her!" mumbled the madman.

"I held true and saw her fall, but I thought it might be her ghost. Pass on, and if you come across a girl lying on the trail don't heed her. She is a female devil with the eye that is evil. Go and forget that you have met Crazy Coon."

He flung her hand away, and darted down the steep path without a backward glance.

Miriam had her revolver in her hand, and if she had been the least flurried by the strange adventure she would have used it.

"Who did he take me for? What has he done?" she murmured, as for a little she watched his retreat.

"Was it all a fancy of his crazy brain, or has there been a murder committed? Perhaps I can be of use. And the affair, whatever it was, may have brought Kirk King to a halt. I will go on and see."

Thus it happened that she came around the sharp turn just as the Kid from Kirby and the young lady he had saved were about to leave the spot where they had so unceremoniously come together.

She recognized the man on sight, though she had never seen him before. This was at least the Kirk King of the Lion register. Whether he was the Kirk King she hoped and believed it was remained to be found out.

She came forward fearlessly, looking from one to the other.

"You are safe, then," she said, addressing the young girl.

"I have but just met a strange looking being, and from his wild talk feared he had murdered one of my own sex. Your coolness reassures me. There cannot be another who was his victim, and I am glad to know my fears were groundless."

"They might not have been, though, if my friend, here had not been near. You met Crazy Coon, no doubt; and if I am still living it is no fault of his save that he did not shoot as true as he hoped for. And he does not generally miss his mark."

"He did not know it, though. He took me for your ghost when he first saw me."

"Blessing, then, he did not care to try conclusions on a spirit. It was a dangerous meeting, and you ought to be thankful you escaped. With him wandering about these hills this is no safe place for you, and if you are wise you will take your walks in some other direction for the future."

"I will take your advice, no doubt, though I really think he was in more danger than I. He came upon me quite suddenly, and by the time he had made up his mind what to do I was debating whether to leave him alive or dead. It was the escape of my life. Ough! The idea of having such a corpse to dream over! I cannot be too thankful that I held my hand. Are you Kirk King?"

She turned abruptly, and shot her question at the man who had been silently studying her face.

"That's what they call me when I'm at home; but down hyerabouts they've made it inter ther Kid from Kirby fur short. You lookin' fur me?"

"I was, which was how I happened to be here. Did you ever know a man by the name of Hugh Cathcart?"

The question seemed to cause no surprise, and the answer was slowly, deliberately dropped out.

"Hugh Cathcart? Sorter seems ez though I ought ter recommember a name like that, an' yit, I won't swear to it. Friend ov yours, was he?"

"Man alive! don't trifle with me. Say yes or no! There ought to be no doubt about your answer."

"Level your head is, an' mebbe it's yes I orter say, an' mebbe, no. Thar war a young man, now, back some two er three year, thet I'm suspectin' orter answered to that name, but he never said so. You think I orter give his affairs away to a stranger?"

"It must have been he, for he mentioned your name a dozen times in his letters, and always as his best friend. Tell me something of him, quick! I have been waiting so long I am dying to know."

"He kin beat that, though. That thar young man are dead."

CHAPTER VII.

TWO OLD PARDS.

"DEAD!"

Miriam seemed overpowered by the announcement, and just that one word was wrung from her lips before she had staggered back to the wall of rock and was resting her shoulder against it while she stared at the Kid in a dazed sort of way.

"'Pears ter hit yer hard, mum. War he a relashun ov yourn?"

"My—my husband!"

She spoke under her breath, and as though she was communing with herself rather than answering a question.

"Sorry, mum, ef so be he war ther man you bin looking fur, but ther truth got ter be told ef it hits ther raw places ever so hard. Ef he told you anything about me you must know I never lie."

"Yes, yes, I know. But tell me more. Where was he when he died? Under what name was he passing? How did he come to meet his death? Why did he stay in the West when he had promised me to come home? And why did he cease to write? Surely he did not die until long after that?"

"Not knowin' when he wrote last I can't say about that part, but I reckon he passed in his checks 'bout a year er more ago. He war at Alaska when he went up ther flume, an' ther cause ov it war, he war shot. I knowed him as Hart Thorne which he allowed ter me wunst war not his right name, an' him, an' me, an' another war pards down that way in ther diggin's."

The Kid from Kirby spoke very deliberately, as if weighing his words; though if these were facts he was telling it did not seem that it should require much reflection to get at them.

"How did you come to suspect his name was Hugh Cathcart?"

"Wal, he war gittin' letters frum some one back East, an' we never see 'em, fur he hed some sorter 'rangement with ther postmaster, or somebody, an' one time I found one ov 'em a-floatin' round, which he hed dropped it; an' ther name on it war that same. I didn't say nothin', fur it warn't my chip, an' I didn't keer ef my pard called hisself Benedick Arnold, er Abe Lincoln, 'long ez he war square ter tie to—which he seemed ter war."

"And who shot him?"

"Now ye'r askin' what I can't answer. I warn't thar. Him an' me hed kinder split off, 'long ov a run ov bad luck, an' he went on ter Alaska, whar I hev heard he struck it rich. An' then thar war some kind ov a racket, an' ther galoot what told me didn't seem ter hev ther rights ov it, but I allow it war s'uthin' 'bout a gal, though why he come inter it I couldn't see. An' they planted him in style, an' somebody jumped his claim, which shortly after petered out, an' thar you have it."

"But was nothing done about it? Was there no trial, no showing whether it was a just deed, or a cold-blooded murder?"

"Oh, they both dropped together, an' thar war a lively ruction at ther fun'ral, fur half ther camp took sides one way, an' half ther camp ther other; an' thar war half a dozen more stiffs ter be planted on ther day follerin'. A man might git ther drop on my pard, but he couldn't pull trigger afore Hart would have him lined. Very neat work it war, so they jest agreed that it served 'em all right, an' let ther thing quit."

Miriam covered her face with her hands and remained silent for a minute or so."

When she looked up again her eyes were red, though there were no traces of tears in them.

"Do not think for a moment that I doubt

the truth of what you have been telling, but I must know it all beyond peradventure, and in such shape as to be able to convince the rest of the world. Can this thing which you have been telling me be proved?"

"It might be, an' then ag'in, it mightn't. You kin prove it all about Hart Thorne, right ernough; but whar Hugh Cathcart comes in at are what it mightn't be so easy ter make plain. I couldn't swear to it; an' ef I couldn't it don't look ez though thar war much room fur ther rest ov menkind."

"But some one in Alaska must have known. His letters?"

"Reckon he'd stopped writin' ter his gal in ther East afore that, an' he didn't git none frum nobody else. Ef he did they war to a man by ther name of Thorne. It ain't ez plain sailin' ez might be."

"True, true. It may never be proved, even to the satisfaction of myself. There was that clue at Gordon's Gulch. I will have to follow it up. Unless I do I will never rest satisfied; and yet, something tells me that this man holds the true solution of the mystery of Hugh's disappearance."

"Gordon's Gulch? Which clue war those?" asked King, showing more interest than he had before manifested.

"It's a likely place ter hear ov him; an' ef you can't hear ov him you kin ov most anybody else. They all seem ter git through thar, 't least wunst in a year."

"The clue was only a trifle, and yet I thought it might amount to something. A man answering to the description I gave of Hugh Cathcart passed through there with a party going South. Nothing was ever heard of him again. It was only chance he was noticed, and no one knew his name or destination. They tell me he is no doubt dead. Even the postmaster who handled those letters is dead. Death always seems to stop the trail."

"Most ginn'rally does, out hyer. Some wants it to, an' some don't; but it don't seem ter make no differen's. They dies all ther same. Sorry fur ye, mum, but you got ther best I hed in ther shop. I'm stoppin' in Boot Jack, now, an' ef I kin think ov anything else I'll give it to yer straight. I kinder got a appointment ter day, an' onless yer wants ter come along I'll hev ter be leavin' yer now."

"Thank you for your kindness so far. Perhaps it would be as well if I listened to no more at present. It takes my strength away from me. I will see you again, and ask you more about the life of the one you call Hart Thorne. Till then, farewell."

She turned with a wave of her hand, and the Kid from Kirby bowed and said nothing.

Both of them seemed to have forgotten the presence of the girl, who only a little before had been so deeply an object of interest.

She stood watching Miriam, listening to her questions and Kirk King's answers, but never once hazarding a word. As the young lady turned away she uttered something like a sigh, and that was all.

"Might jest ez well not say nothin' ov this yere interview to ther old man. Ef he hears some'un war pryin' an' peekin' 'round ter-day, nothin' 'll convince him she won't be back ter-morrer. An' weemen folks, allers 'ceptin' yerself, are mostly bad medicine fur Dave Brady. Don't furgit; I knowed him ov old."

"Yes, yes, an' I was glad you didn't tell her what I know you might have."

"What war that, little mischi'f?"

"That the name of the third pard was David Brady. Am I not right?"

"Right you are, though I don't know how yer came ever ter 'spect it. Yer never see me afore yisterday, an' I dunno ez yer ever heard ov me; an' I'm bettin' high Dave never menshuned Hart's name in yer hearin'."

"That is all so; but I knew it all the same. Now, we had better be going. Dave may be getting anxious; and if you have good news for him the sooner he hears it the better."

Side by side the two went up the trail, turned a jutting rock, went on some distance, and then came to a cabin, perched in the mountain side.

"Hyer we be!" exclaimed the Kid, as he went softly through the door.

"Back ag'in, an' I tole yer how I'd be comin'. Ef thar ain't a brass band an' a

torchlight percesshun it's 'cause I didn't give Boot Jack chance ter freeze on to a hero."

There was a bed in one corner of the room, and from it came a weak voice.

"Luck didn't play you any tricks, then? It was the last chance in the box but I knew you'd make the raffle or die tryin' it. Tell us the good news, old man"

"Monst'rus easy to do that. I blowed in fifteen ter make me solid with ther boys, an' then tackled ther Tiger. Oh, I hit him right whar he lived, an' I bu'sted his den wide open. Idunno but what I 'cumulated a hull carnerval ov shootin' fur ther future, but that don't count. I got away with Vance Ullman's bank, an' ther Rounders ez tried ter do me up afterwards, an' hyer's yer leetle pile. Count ther total an' gi'mme half."

He threw down a bag of gold and a thick wad of bills as he finished speaking, and then sunk into a seat by the side of the bed, watching with a grin the eager way in which a slender white hand reached for the money.

"It seems too good to be true," went on the man on the couch.

"You are a true pard, if ever there was one. This will set me on my feet again—the half of it I mean. As soon as I get over this cursed hole near my liver I'll be out, making things hum at the Copper Bottom, and if they don't hum I'll be able to ask the reason why."

"Ov course yer will. But I bin a-thinkin' over what you tole me last night, an' though I ain't a-yearnin' ter settle down hyer yit, till you gits able ter be 'round, mebbe I better take a hand in at the mine. I kin keep things a-goin', an' thar won't be much danger ov it's bein' jumped long ez thar's a man ter hold."

"Good boy. You have put about ten years of new life into me. I was getting away down in the dumps when you turned up. Let me think it all over. It seems too good to be true. Lill will get us some dinner, and after that we will talk it up. If only poor Hart was here yet, we'd make things hum after the fashion of the good old times."

Kirk King caught at the name, though he gave no outward sign of the interest he felt.

"That's so. I've bin a-thinkin' ov Hart offen ov late. He was a mighty good pard ter tie to, an' it looks like I orter bin to his fun'ral. You sure he's dead?"

"Without a doubt. I have already told you all that I know."

"Pity, ez yer say. We got room fur him right now."

"But I wouldn't have cared to trust him with the last dollar in the chest. He never knew when he was in luck, and the worse his run was the harder he tried to buck against it."

"That's what. Ef he hed knowed when ter stop I reckon he'd bin a-livin' yit."

"Yes, and that reminds me. Did you see anything of the man who potted me?"

"Ther doctor? You bet I did. An' I laid it onto him in fine shape. I war jest a-itchin' ter read his pedigree, an' ez he wouldn't gi'mme no chance I made one. I knowed we'd hev ter fight sooner er later, an' thar's nothin' like startin' in squar'."

So as dinner was ready—for it was a very simple one—King began to eat, and between mouthfuls gave a description of his adventures at the saloon and afterward.

He made a pretty fair story of it, and the eyes of Dave Brady glistened as he heard how his friend had held the drop on the doctor.

"But all the same," he said, with a sigh, "I am afraid we must down him hard, or in the long run he will kill us both."

CHAPTER VIII.

A BARGAIN FOR A MURDER.

DAVE BRADY was in his bed, but he was decidedly on the mend, and the sight of the wealth his pard had won the preceding night was about as good a medicine as he could have.

The conversation given in the preceding chapter has told the situation of affairs so well it is not necessary to enter into a longer explanation.

The Kid from Kirby had found him quite incidentally, as it seemed, and had been intrusted with his last dollar to try the desperate fortunes of the gaming-table for their united interest.

Their conversation went on for awhile, and then the division was made, carelessly, and as though it was a thing of no particular moment. Each had a little fortune now at his command, and between them they had a mining property which, if Dave was to be believed, might turn out a veritable bonanza.

"If they have jumped it, well and good, but I ought to have heard it before this," said Brady, finally.

"I reckon if they had killed me outright it would have been done long ago; but being as I am living they will have to let it alone for looks till they can have another hack at me. They were better friends than I thought for. There are a couple men holding it, but all the same, I would just as soon you got the rest of the boys together, if you can find them, and look after it a little. Work may as well be going on, and when you see the place you will know as well as I just what ought to be done."

"Funny ef I didn't, long ez we worked tergether. You give me ther lay ov ther land an' I'll try an' find ther hole ter-day, an' straighten things up ter-morrow. Guess I kin git time ter give yer another call, then, an' let yer know how ther game's runnin'."

"All right. Perhaps you had better take the most of this coin along and use what you need out of it. There's all I want there to start me, and I don't want you spending your wealth. I'm only too glad to give you the half of the Copper Bottom to have you in with me."

"Not much, pard. Thar's streaks, an' thar's other streaks. I can't clean draw outen ther swim, an' ef I should strike one ov them other ones I'd bu'st ye down ter bed rock in no time, an' you'd be wuss off ner when we started. You had a twenty then."

"What ov it?" almost fiercely asked Dave Brady.

"We pulled together once before, and we would have been pulling together all the time if you hadn't said you were hoodooing my luck. For the man who saved my life two or three times over I can stand a power of hoodoo. Lose it if you want to; and when we get down to bed rock we'll find some way of making the rifle again."

"Thankee, Dave. I might 'a' knowed it'd be that way, but I guess we won't try it. Hold tight ter what yer got, an' we'll see ef we can't double it 'thout a bu'st. Jest shake, an' say it's ther same old pards, an' we'll let it go at that."

The men shook hands quietly; and after some further talk in regard to the mine and its location, the Kid from Kirby took his departure.

The girl had been present during the most of the conversation, though she had taken no part in it. When King had gone she looked after him with something like a frown on her handsome little face.

"He's a good man, is he, Dave?" she asked, still listening to the sound of his retiring footsteps.

"The best I know," was the ready answer.

"He saved my life two or three times in old days, and now he has come mighty near to doing it again."

"And you can trust him, sure?"

"With everything I have. He is not much for handsome, but he is all there for good."

"Well, he don't look like it. He can blow his own horn for everything that's bad, but when it comes to anything good he's too confounded modest to live. Why, confound him, he saved my life out there, a bit ago, and never told you a word about it. He must think I am of no account whatever."

Brady laughed, though a little anxiously, at the outburst.

"Don't be jealous, Little Mischief. Such things he does as he goes along, and thinks no more about them. Perhaps he was afraid you didn't want me to know. You were in some mischief or other, and he might think I would see you didn't have a chance to get in the like again. How was it?"

"Oh, he got his hands full doing it, and that is the truth. I only plumped right down thirty feet, straight for his head, as he stood on the trail around the bend. And if he hadn't stood remarkably steady we would have gone on down a couple hundred feet further, and wouldn't had any one to catch either of us."

Dave knew the spot she spoke of, and shivered in spite of himself.

"Foolish child, what possessed you to put yourself into such a dangerous position, and how came you to fall?"

She touched the scratch on her neck which could still be faintly seen.

"If the thing that made that had come an inch or so in a different direction I don't think it would have made much difference whether he caught me or not. Crazy Coon was higher up on the rocks than I, and he sent me his compliments with his Winchester."

"The villain!"

"Yes, and the idiot, and the fool, and the dangerous maniac, and all that, but the fact is, he did it. I lost my head for just a second, and that was when I tumbled. And Mister Owleyes caught me, and said I was a butterfly lighting on his hand, and that sort of rot, and forgot all about it. I'll show him if I'm a butterfly."

It was a little hard to tell whether she was really angry, or whether she was only taking this line to enable her to tell Brady of the danger she had been in.

Dave chose to think it was the latter.

"That is Kirk King, every day in the year. If he saved your life a dozen times he would say no more about it. But if he had tumbled Crazy Coon off the rocks he would have told me so, in case I had to look out for breakers. He might have told me in his own way, but I would have known of it. Did he see him?"

"No. Neither of us saw him after he pulled trigger, and I only for a second before. He had brains enough to keep out of the way. But I suspect we will hear more of him before we get through. If we want to be safe we will have to take our guns and hunt him down, though that seems too much like murder. I wonder what we will do. The villain can shoot if he is a fool."

Dave Brady made no answer. He was considering the problem, and from the uneasy look on his face he was not finding any ready answer.

Meantime, the Kid from Kirby was striding down the trail, busy with his own thoughts, in which the saving of the girl who was called Lily was cutting no figure.

He knew Dave Brady had always been one of the sanguine kind, and was considering if all he had said of the Copper Bottom was to be believed.

There was one thing which seemed to point that way, and that was the bullet-hole which Dave was engaged in nursing.

A man didn't get such things without a reason, and the one which Brady offered was good enough until a better one could be found. If the doctor was after the mine, and couldn't get it any other way, no doubt he would be willing to put its owner out of the way; but then, the thing must have considerable value to induce him to go to such lengths.

"Let her go at that," thought the Kid, at last.

"I'll know when I see what's in that hole in the ground. Ef she war a bit older I'd think maybe there war trouble 'bout ther gal; but she are only a kitten yit, an' her misch'f don't do no harm. I don't keer who she be, she are a good one ter stick by Dave ther way she's done. 'Pears ter hev nu'ssed him stiddy ez though she war his gran'-mother. He'll tell me all erbout it some day, an' till then it ain't no use ter worry 'bout her. But I'd ez soon thar warn't a woman in ther case, ef she be next door to a kid."

Dave Brady had given him directions how to find his claim, and with a man like Kirk King it would have been hard to miss the spot. He did not have to look for it, but went straight toward the place where the mine was located.

"Right over thar she lies," was his thought as he reached the crown of an elevation, and looked downward.

"This hyer, I reckon, are ther Occidental, an' that looks like ther doctor hisself. Go slow, Kid. Him an' that man looks ter be comin' this way, an' I dunno ez I keer ter meet him. It wouldn't be healthy ter kill him out hyer, an' I'll swear I don't want him ter kill me."

He drew back hastily, satisfied that he had not been seen, since the two men, one of whom he believed was the doctor, had their

heads together, and were talking low, and after an interested fashion.

Although they would come near him, yet, if they followed the faint path they were treading, it was not likely they would actually come in sight, and the Kid threw himself down and waited.

It would not have been hard for him to have withdrawn altogether, but running away was something he despised.

The steps sounded nearer, and soon were so plainly to be heard that the Kid began to think the two men were going to come upon him after all.

Fortunately, that was not the case.

They finally ceased, and he knew the men had seated themselves not a dozen paces away. Had he been standing up instead of lying down they would have been able to see him plainly enough as they gave a glance around before settling themselves to the conversation which they certainly did not care to have overheard.

The first words he heard were from the doctor:

"No, the fool is going to get well; but it will take some time yet, and there would be no hurry if we could wait for him to be out and around again."

"But it looks as though he was going to have a pard; and that same pard will be a tough one to manage."

"If he were willing to sell why not have bought in thyself? It would have been the easier way."

From his accent King judged the second speaker was a Spaniard or Mexican.

"Because he would not sell—to me. This is an old pard of his, and now he has the coin with which to develop. He cleaned things up at the Tiger, last night."

"Yes, I have heard, and a bad man he seems to be."

"One of the worst, except that he's not for sale. The Kid from Kirby is straight goods to tie to, and if he starts in to back Dave Brady's hand he'll stay with him till the last horn blows."

"Better for thee, then, that he were dead."

"Good heavens! What do you suppose I brought you out here for? Of course it would be; and you are the man who is to take him off. What will be the damage?"

CHAPTER IX.

TAMING A MADMAN.

THE announcement made by Doctor Andrews did not appear to be any particular surprise. The man with him had been suspecting what was to come, and was ready for it.

"Thou hast told me he was a bad man to deal with, and as it can only be the truth it will make it come somewhat the higher. There is the danger from him, as well as the risk afterward. As it is, the way seems open for thee, why not do it thyself?"

"Oh, come, Manuel, a man of your age and experience should not ask such a question. He is so thoroughly on his guard with me that I doubt if I could manage to start off with a shade of advantage, and if I had too much it would look bad. You open the ball from the start, and he'll just want to maul you and let you go. While he is trying that on you can be getting in your work in great shape."

"It may be; it may be. But perhaps he strikes quick and hard. I have known a blow from one of these American boxers to break a neck, and you say the man is almost a giant. Better that he be met of a dark night, and a knife put between his ribs. I could have that done for a hundred and fifty, and I be not near the spot."

"A hundred for you, and fifty for the man who does the work!" laughed the doctor.

"I care not who does it so that it is done, and done quickly. If you are really afraid to tackle the fellow best tell me so at once, and I may find some one else who is not."

"Afraid! Manuel is never afraid, but he would be a fool who looked not after his safety. Give me five hundred and I will attack him myself to-night, and where you can see the thing done."

"Now you talk. To-night be it, and the

five hundred will be ready when I know the game is complete, and no chance of suspicion falling on me through any fault of yours."

"The notice is short, but the wages are good. I will be there."

"Where?"

"Wherever he is. Most likely he will come to the Tiger again. He has tasted blood there and could not keep away from the place if he would. I will see him."

"Be careful, then; for Vance Ullman is a man who allows no foul play unless he happens to have a hand in it. I think I would have come back on him myself last night, but Vance was watching like a hawk. He has no great love for the stranger, if I am not mistaken, but all the same would give him an even chance for his life or kill the man who got away with him."

"It may come Vance Ullman's turn some time. Better for him not to meddle with Manuel. Is that all?"

"Yes. In the other matter we will wait until this is settled. Brady's men have drawn out, and there is no use to put one of ours in for the present. If any one else tries the game we will checkmate it. But till Brady is around and out, and dealt with again, I don't propose to crowd the thing too hard."

"Perhaps it may be a bait that will catch the man from Kirby."

"Perhaps, if we can find no better."

The doctor spoke absently, as though he thought the conference was over. In a moment more King heard their departing footsteps.

The information which had come to his ears did not disturb him much.

He had expected to be met in some such fashion, and it would hardly even put him more on his guard. He would sooner face the two men in a fair fight—or even in an unfair one—than be caught here eavesdropping, and it was on that account alone that he heaved a sigh of satisfaction when the murmur of their voices at last died away.

"Guess I won't take just this route to getter ther Copper Bottom," he thought as he glided away from the spot with footsteps wonderfully soft for one of his proportions.

At first he had intended to strike directly for the Copper Bottom shaft, though he would have to pass within easy pistol range of the Occidental, in which he knew Doctor Andrews owned a controlling interest.

Now, he did not care to take that course, since, if he was noticed it might be suspected that he was near enough to at least see if not hear the secret conference.

It cost him a detour of perhaps a mile, but that was a trifle with a man whose limbs never seemed to tire, and the twenty minutes which he lost counted for but little. He had no other work for the day, and there was an abundance of time to finish his inspection and get back to Boot Jack before nightfall.

He had heard enough, however, to give him an inkling of how things were at the mine.

Dave Brady had told him that there were a couple of men there to look after things, and that he had reason to believe there would be no move made against the mine until he had first been disposed of.

It looked as though these men had been bought or frightened off, and that the shaft was lying open for the first man who came along with the nerve to drop into it.

"Reckon ef ther doctor don't moveright lively he'll be a shade late gittin' his men in. I don't know much about Boot Jack, but I'll bet ther fellers I put thar will stay, unless they're kerried out. But, mebbe it won't be so good ter be seen perspectin' around. Andrews are no slouch, an' he'd be gittin' riddy fur me on sight. Good thing thet I dropped to that bit of buzzin'."

The Kid from Kirby was as wily as an Indian when the notion took him. He approached the mine with all the caution possible to prevent being seen, and yet never allowed himself to put on a suspicious appearance. If any one had seen him he would have been ready to swear the Kid was marching boldly along.

There was the shaft, just where he looked for it, and the rope and windlass, but to his experienced eye it looked as though they had not been used for several days, if not

more, and the whole place had a deserted appearance.

He leaned over the shaft and sent his voice downward, but there was no answer.

After waiting a little he called again, and receiving no response he prepared to descend.

He looked sharply at the rope, to see that it was fast to the windlass, and that it had not been tampered with.

Then, he lowered it until the box on the end touched the floor below, made the handle fast, and seizing the rope with his hands swung himself over the shaft, and slowly began to slide downward.

The depth of the shaft was not great. Dave Brady had told him, and he had measured it for himself.

The rope was strong, and everything below remained silent.

There seemed no particular reason why he should be nervous. The bottom was plainly visible, and the mouth of the tunnel which ran back for some distance under the hill.

Yet, nervous he was, and he came down with his face toward the drift, and just as he reached a level with its upper arch he suddenly swung himself back and then flung himself feet forward at the tunnel.

He grazed the arch at its highest part, and landed two or three feet from its mouth.

But most surprising thing, he landed full against some one who was crouching there, and there was a low, savage cry, which sounded as though it might have been forced from the lips of a wild beast, which was accompanied by the sharp report of a gun.

The bullet flattened itself harmlessly against the rocky wall of the shaft, and Kirk King, as active as a panther, and almost as savage, had his assailant by the throat, and was bending over him, before the battered lead had fallen to the floor of the pit.

Hands like his took little time to do their work. If he had been the least bit excited he might have torn the life out of the lurker before fairly learning what he looked like.

The pressure was just sufficient, however, to bring temporary insensibility, and in a trice the Kid knotted a cord around the wrists and ankles of the fellow, and dragged him to the shaft.

So far, in the gloom of the tunnel he had only been able to see a human figure, whose limbs he found more by the sense of feeling than by that of sight.

And though this person was possessed of a wonderful strength, which would have overcome most any one but a Hercules, such as this into whose hands he had fallen, he fought like a wild beast, with no sound save now and then an angry snarl. When the case became altogether hopeless he fell back, living yet a dead weight.

The face was a strange one, but Kirk King read it with interest, staring straight down into the savage eyes that were glaring up full at his.

"Pears ter me, sonny, I've heared ther crack ov that gun afore, an' ef it hed bin out in ther open I'd 'a' bin sure ov it. Thar can't be two loonys wanderin' round hyer with a Winchester, an' so I reckon you must be Crazy Coon. What in blazes be yer doin' down hyer?"

There was no answer save a gritting of teeth: and the eyes continued to glare into his own. Knowing as little about this creature as he did Kirk King was not sure whether he could talk.

There was not however a trace of anger or resentment in his tones as he continued:

"I don't reckon yer ed'dycashun hev bin entirely neglected, but mebbe yer mind wants freshin' up a bit. A kid ez kin shoot plumb center kin learn 'most ary thing else, an' ez I hev time by ther bushel I'm countin' on givin' yer a few lessons in ther English langwidge. Now, you keep on a-lookin' at me, an' lissen right sharp ter what I got ter say next."

He held up his forefinger with an impressing gesture, and silently returned the stare of the lunatic.

After a little it seemed as though the fellow would gladly withdraw his gaze if he could. The fierceness went out of his eyes, and there was less of a snarl about his hanging lip.

"Yer open ter reason, be yer? Now, I'll say it ag'in, an' say it slow. Who be ye?"

"Crazy Coon," responded the imbecile, with a grin.

"What do yer want 'round hyer?"

"This is my mine. There is blood on it, but it is mine. See. I wade around in it till my feet are red, and my hands dripping, but I don't care. There will be more blood in it, blood till it fills the drift, but the gold under it is mine."

"Gosh ter blazes, but yer kin reel it off when yer gits started! I don't see no sich marks ez them, but p'raps thar's s'uthin' wrong with my eyesight. Who's blood is it?"

"The blood of Crazy Coon's father, and of his mother, of his brother, and his own. See. There is the hole they made, and it's running yet. Don't you think it ought to stop soon?"

He bent his head forward, and Kirk King could see a long, ghastly cicatrix, extending over the crown, growing fainter on the forehead, until it was lost near the brow of his right eye.

CHAPTER X.

MANUEL MEETS A MAN.

"THAT war a nasty lick an' no mistake; who gave it to you?"

"Dave Brady, and Dave Brady's girl," answered Crazy Coon, sullenly.

But even as he spoke his eyes tried to drop from those of the Kid from Kirby.

"Why, you tearin' idgeot! That scar wasn't put thar this year, er last year either, an' Dave's only bin in these diggin's a few months. You hev got things mixed."

"They have the mine, and the men that took the mine killed us all," was the stubborn answer.

"Thar does seem ter hev bin a 'hullsale slaughter, an' you wants ter keep it a-goin'. I don't prezackly onderstand how ter stop it, but stop it I got ter. See hyer, I'm goin' ter take this hyer contrack off yer han's. Ef thar's ter be ary shootin' round hyer I'm goin' ter do it."

"Crazy Coon can shoot, and that is enough."

"Wal, it might be ef I war dead sure you'd pick out ther right mark ter practice on, but I can't hev no sich off-hand work ez you bin tryin' yer hand at."

He reached over and felt carefully but firmly around the scar.

All there seemed solid now; and without further hesitation he picked the lunatic up by the heels and set him head downward against the wall of the shaft.

"Ez I told yer, I'm goin' ter run this thing now, an' I ain't keering much fur blood, either, so it's ther right color. Ef you think you know more about it than I do, all right. But ef you bother me, er Dave Brady, er Little Mischief, I'll jest sot yer up that way, an' I'll let yer stay thar. Thar ain't no way fur ye ter git down tell I say so, no man kin pull yer down so ez you'll stay down, and ef I war a hundred mile away, an' you were drawin' a bead on ther man ez killed yer mammy, ef I jest snapped my finger, so, you'd flop right up, heels on top, tell I said git down. Now see ef it ain't so?"

He waved his hand gently, and Crazy Coon rolled down to a sitting posture.

He snapped his finger and thumb, and the young man rolled up against the wall once more, standing erect, like a reversed statue.

"That's good ernuf. You're a fair subjeck, an' I think I see ther right way ter take held ov yer. You b'long ter me now, and I kin trust yer fur ther present."

He turned Coon around again, and then carelessly cut the cords with which he had bound him.

"Jest let that gun lay a bit, an' you an' me'll look 'round. I want ter see ef this hyer thing are wuth ther oshuns ov blood ez are like ter be spilled over it."

For the present, at least, Crazy Coon was quite a changed individual.

He followed close at the heels of his master, never casting a glance even at the gun which lay where it had fallen, at the side of the drift.

Probably the eyes of the lunatic had something of the properties of a cat, but Kirk King was not one of those men who could see in the dark, and he looked for something to make a light before going further.

On one side of the drift, just after it left the shaft, was a little chamber, and this he examined. There was a sort of couch there, and hanging on a peg driven into the wall was the very thing he was looking for, a lantern.

Taking it down he struck a match, applied it to the wick, and by the light thus obtained began his exploration.

When he came back to the shaft he had been an hour away from it, and had not gone very far, either.

"It's w'uth ther reesk, Crazy, ef looks don't lie, but ef it's a unlucky mine thar's no tellin'. Ther bottom may drap out when we got our lass' dollar in ther drift. Thar's a heap sight in luck, but I never heard ov Dave Brady bein' a pertickler lucky sort ov a man. We'll try it a whirl, aryhow, jest fur ther sake of bein' old-time pards, an' it may be we hev struck it rich. Now, see hyer, Crazy."

Coon looked at him like a startled dog, and nodded.

"You got a place ter sleep, an' plenty ter eat?"

The lunatic nodded an assent.

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no. Hyer's a few dollars. Ef you know how ter use 'em they'll do yer at a pinch tell I see yer ag'in. I'm goin' ter look inter this story ov yourn, an' ef there's ary truth in it I'll take yer inter this thing on a full fourth sheer. That's half ov what I war ter git, an' mebbe it'll take ther cuss off. You sabbe?"

Perhaps he did. He gave a nod, and something more like a growl than anything else.

"Then, yer wants ter run along home fur ther present, an' see thet they don't git a glimp' ov ye, over at ther Occidental, ez ye'r goin'. We'll hev this hyer thing runnin' wide open, with a great big boom, in less than no time, an' ef you kin behave yerself you kin loaf 'round an' see it's done on ther squar'. That's all. You kin git out ov this, now."

Whatever else he may have, or may not have understood, the permission was evidently no mystery. Crazy Coon turned to the rope, and shinned his way up.

As he went King saw he had his Winchester again strapped, over his shoulder, but he said nothing. He had been trying an experiment, and if it was successful the fellow could be trusted with the gun.

If it was not it would make little difference. Sooner or later the young man would be able to obtain fire-arms again.

There was one idea which struck him when it was too late to ask any questions about it.

When he came to the Copper Bottom he had certainly found the rope drawn up. How then had the lunatic descended the shaft?

He knew Coon could climb like an ape, but it seemed hardly possible he could have scrambled down the perpendicular sides of the shaft; while there was no other mode of entrance, so far as he had seen.

"Let her go at that," he muttered.

"Thar's no use ter call him back, an' ef thar's another shaft, er way ov gittin' in, I kin find it myself. It's gittin' along in ther shank ov the a'rternoon, an' it's time I war showin' up at ther Lion. Ef I want ter make up fur loss' time an' git a double squar' meal I got ter russel 'round lively. Thar's that 'p'intment with Manuel. I mustn't be furgittin' that, either."

He twisted himself up the rope as easily, if not as gracefully, as Crazy Coon had done, and when at a level with the surface took a cautious look around.

If any one watched the spot he was not visible, but the Kid exercised the greatest care in moving away, and it was a fact that he was seen by no one from the Occidental. In due course of time he arrived at the Lion, and proceeded to put himself outside of a substantial supper.

Doctor Andrews had been correct in his theory that the Tiger Saloon would have an almost irresistible attraction for the Kid from Kirby; and since the latter had heard the conversation he was more than ever decided on visiting the place that night, though he knew to do so was playing into the hands of his enemies.

It was early for the Tiger, however, when he passed out from the supper table, and

King was undecided just how to fill in the time.

There was one thing which caused him to want to get away from the hotel, and that was, he did not care to interview Miss Cathcart again, until he knew a little more about some points which he had not as yet taken the leisure to study out.

He went out quietly, and turned down the street, to finally bring up at a saloon which he had noticed on his way out of the town that morning.

He walked straight toward the bar, yet he cast a glance around; and saw two or three faces which he knew without telling were not friendly. One of them belonged to a Mexican, and if he was not much mistaken he was the very Manuel who had been bargaining with Doctor Andrews.

"By the mighties, ef he sees his chance he'll be wantin' ter mount me hyer, an' I sw'ar I'd sooner not hev ter fou't him on his own dunghill. I kin git away with him all right ernuf, but how about ther crowd, arterwards. Kirk, me son, yer may ez well go slow, fur wunst in yer life."

The situation was only unpleasant from the fact that as a stranger there, it was more than likely in case of any trouble not only would the crowd be all against him, but the rights of the affair would never be fairly told by the bystanders.

And as he thought it highly likely that before the evening's amusements were over Manuel would be a very sick man, that was a matter of some importance.

"Go slow, Kirk," he thought to himself, and he laughed as he thought it.

"It ain't offen yer shows ther white feather, but I wouldn't blame yer in this hyer diffikilty. Recommember yer hez a pard ez may not be dependin' on yer, but orter. Ef arything happens ter ye now what would become ov him, an' Leetle Mischi'f? An' it wouldn't be a bad move ter be leadin' 'em on a leetle. It'll give twice ez good a chance ter make up me case. Fur the present, Manuel, I reckon I kin spare yer."

The thoughts went through his brain like lightning, and then he was leaning at the bar, taking a solitary drink, and apparently unmindful of the scowls on the faces near him.

The appearance had been a surprise to Manuel and he was not ready at once for action.

He made an almost imperceptible motion which was a signal understood by his friends, and after a momentary hesitation strode toward the Kid from Kirby.

King was on the watch, and, expecting foul play if he offered the chance, drew himself around and faced the Mexican.

"Thou art the man who cast insult upon us of the Occidental, and the man who owns it. A warning to thee which it will be well to heed. Such a thing cannot be done twice without blood. If thou art wise this camp will be free of thy presence before he meets thee again."

"Thankee, friend, but ther Kid kin 'most gin'rally sometimes take keer of himself every time. Ef ther doctor wants ter see me I'll be on hand an' he kin speak fur hisself. An' I reckon he won't be sayin' much, either. Ef he can't do his own talkin' I ain't so sure it's ary one else's put in. Er, does he hire you ter do his talkin'?"

"Little does he say to such as thou, unless it be with lead or steel. And thou art not the man to wait for him to address thee with either."

"Ye'r hittin' it off about right. I go slow when a man talks, an' ther Doc are a man, ef it are a mighty bad one. But what be you?"

"A man, too; and thy equal in any way thy choice lies. If a friendly warning sticks in thy craw take something else."

"All right. Boom her along; I'm a-waitin'."

With a savage oath Manuel sprang at him, a wicked knife flashing into his hand as he sprang.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN AT THE DOOR.

The attack was not unexpected, and Kirk King was ready for it.

He knew how hard he could hit, and he was willing to run the risk of getting in a blow.

Without waiting for the attack to reach him he stepped boldly in to meet it. His left fist shot out in a crushing hit, and Manuel fell, the knife dropping from his grasp.

"Stiddy, boys!" he warningly uttered as he saw something like a movement for a rush. "This are yer frien's picnic, an' you better let him git ther wu'th ov his ticket afore ary one else tries ter chip. If yer begins it now thar won't be nobody left ter ker-ry him out. You hear me? An' you better would; fur ther rest ov what I got ter say 'll be done with these, all ther same ez if I war ther doctor hisself."

Long before he had finished speaking he had whipped out his two revolvers, and had their muzzles turned toward the crowd. It made little difference to him if several pistols were already drawn. He had the drop on the gang, and they knew it.

Manuel lay motionless, save for a slight quiver of his limbs. The blow was intended to knock him out, and it had done the work most effectually.

"If thou hast slain Manuel thou wilt never go out of this place alive," was the fierce answer from the nearest man he held covered.

"It was a foul blow, and if thou hath killed, Boot Jack will hang thee."

"Foul nothin'. He war only doin' what he war paid fur, and he didn't finish his job. He'll be up an' swearin' shortly, and you kin tell him I'll be waitin' fur him at ther Tiger. Ef this thing goes funder it'll be apt ter make him tired."

No one cared to interfere with the Kid from Kirby, further than in the way of a side remark. King felt sure Manuel had intended to work the matter alone, and have no pards with whom to divide the profits. He stalked out of the room without a single backward glance, and there was no one there who had nerve enough to send in a bullet from behind.

"Mebbe he won't be jest so anxious ter settle it with ther knife when we meet ag'in."

"An' I can't say ez I'm sorry. Ef he hez ther nerve I think, he'll be 'round to ther Tiger afore long, howlin' fur blood; an' Vance'll see thet he hez a even chance ter hev it; an' nothin' more."

Of course, that meant Manuel would follow him for the purpose of attacking him, which was just what Kirk King was after.

Once get Manuel to make an attack witnessed by half a dozen square men, and he thought it would be safe to send him back to the doctor on a shutter.

He did not steer for the Tiger at once, however.

He strolled around the town for a little, eagerly watching to see if he was followed.

"Guess he be layin' back, nu'ssin' his eyes up ter hev em in good order afore he comes out ter hunt ther Kid," was his thought as, half an hour or more later, he entered the Tiger, and found the lay-out had just been spread, and the crowd was beginning to assemble, a full twenty minutes earlier than was customary.

Among the unemployed he found several of the men he had met there the night before, and they nodded, and even drank with him, but they looked askance at the rough clothes he still wore, and he saw that friends who would be willing to stand by him were scarce.

"They d'unno thet I'm sich a heap-sight better than I look," was his mental consolation.

"Any fool kin bu'st a bank ef he keeps a-pressin' a streak ov hog-luck; but it takes a man ter keep his end up a'rterwards. When they've seen me crowded wunst er twiste they'll set a bigger figger on ther new ad-dishun ter ther populashun."

Nothing of this appeared in his conversation, however, for he rambled on in a self-satisfied way, just loud enough to show he was on very good terms with himself, and not so loud that Vance Ullman could find anything to object to.

Manuel appeared to be slow about coming, and the Kid began to think his Mexican blood ran colder than he had judged. It might be he would prefer an ambush, and a shot from behind, after all.

While he was talking at the bar a man came through the door, and King recognized him as the Sport from Denver.

The sport had not shown any great

cordiality, so far, but then, he had shown nothing in the other direction, and had given him a friendly hint or two that morning. It was not altogether good for a new-comer like the Kid from Kirby to play a lone hand if he could find a partner to assist, so he greeted the sport with a nod, and a word or two that were not too familiar.

"Still living?" asked Turner, with a laugh.

"Don't be discouraged. The night is young yet, and we may have cold meat for breakfast before Vance puts up his shutters. I just heard your friend down street inquiring for you. He's a bad man from 'way-back, and if you are going to run you had better begin now."

"Thankee, pard, fur ther tellin' ov it. I'm nothin' but a pore, lone infant, an' I don't like ter be crowded. P'rhaps I better go afore he comes an' takes me all apart."

The Kid gave a glance at his own stalwart proportions, and the exaggerated look of terror he managed to crowd into his face raised something of a laugh.

"A healthy leetle infant he be," said one in his hearing.

"Ef he's good accordin' ter size I reckon one man wouldn't have much ter do with him."

"That's what Manuel Perez must have thought shortly after he went for him with a knife. It took ten minutes to bring him to, and he's not very steady on his pins yet."

This was the first intelligence of the fracas which had reached the Tiger; and it was heard with interest. Manuel had a record, made since he came to Boot Jack, and there were few there who would have cared to gain his enmity, even though they would have been willing to meet him in an open fight which should decide once for all.

"But he'll be on ther road shortly," suggested the man who had lately spoken.

"He's round Boot Jack fur some time, an' he's never bin known ter let a blow pass. Stranger, yer wants ter be on yer guard."

"I reckon. An' ther town are lerable ter lose a ornament she ain't fairly used to yit."

The Kid spoke sadly, and perhaps the line he took was not in good taste, but he shrewdly reasoned that unless he provoked an immediate attack from Manuel's friends he would be apt to make two parties, and in so doing gather up friends for himself.

If there was no blood in sight it would not be in human nature for the men not to take sides.

That might give him a following when the pinch of war should come.

It was the Sport from Denver who spoke up.

"Or, the Occidental lose one of its best fighting men; and I am willing to put up a small stake it will be the latter."

"You'll soon find out, fur hyer he comes now!"

One of the outsiders gave the warning, and without another word the little crowd around the bar opened out, leaving a lane from the door to where the Kid was standing.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HAZARD OF THE DICE.

THE announcement proved to be a startling one.

That is, there was a dramatic hush for an instant after the almost involuntary movement had been made, and an air of expectancy in the eyes of every one but the Kid from Kirby.

He was as unconcerned as though he had never heard the words.

And yet, it seemed as though his eyes were turned straight for the door, and hardly a man in sight but would have thought that he saw no one save Manuel, lingering for an instant at the threshold.

In that they were just as broadly mistaken as a crowd generally is.

Kirk King was really watching Manuel closely enough, but he was doing something more.

In an unnoticed sort of way he managed to take in the whole room, and he saw

that half a dozen rough-looking men started up from different directions, and turned his way.

There were more of the same sort near to him, and it only took that first look for the Kid to decide that he was environed by enemies.

They were all strangers to him, but he had not a doubt but that they were heelers from the Occidental.

Whether they had been put there by the doctor to back Manuel's game, or whether they were pards of the Mexican, and had been stationed by him in advance, he could not tell, but to him it made no difference. So that he knew they were there he was ready for them all.

Manuel came gliding across the floor with the sinuosity of a snake, and the savage silence of a tiger.

When he was a few paces from Kirk King he halted and glared at him, while his lips parted in a snarl.

The Kid was looking at him as though he had never seen him before, and every one could observe that he made no movement for a weapon. Either he was very careless, or had a solid faith in his own prowess.

"A blow! this man has given me a blow!"

He glared up at the Kid, and there was a deadly passion in his tones.

"Kinder looks like it," softly murmured King, looking critically at the side of the Mexican's face.

"A blow, and to Manuel Perez. Such thing never happened before. It can be wiped out only with blood."

"Correct—in your lamps. Go fur it."

The Kid was as cool as a cucumber, and as yet had made no movement to draw a weapon, though his hand hung within easy reach of the revolver at his hip, for his wrist rested carelessly on the edge of the bar. The invitation was cordial, but Manuel, in spite of the froth on his lips was in no hurry to accept.

He had some little experience of Kirk King on the defensive, when assaulting him with a knife, and had an idea that he was as quick on the draw as the worst of the bad men he had seen—and some of them were more rapid than Manuel. That was his weak point, and he was aware of it.

"I go for it, but if thou art a man of courage, and not the ragged coward thou lookest, it will not be like a wild beast, but as a man of honor. Manuel Perez never yet slew without there was equal chance for life or death to the two."

"One ov us kin die, an' one ov us kin live, an' that's what yer means by ther chances bein' equal. That's jest ther way I want it. You fix ther circus ter suit yerself an' you'll be playin' all ther time inter my han's; but don't keep these gents waitin'. They're a lot hungrier fur ther fun than you be fur blood."

"It is well for thee to talk when the two revolvers of Vance Ullman protect thee, but dare to follow me out to the street, and with pistol or knife thou wilt see how vengeance falls on him who insults Manuel."

"Oh, Mister Ullman don't want no glass broke, er a gang mussin' up ther floor; but fur two real gents ter settle a leetle matter—ef it ain't done with a scrappin' match, er a jinglin' ov ther winders—I don't think he would kick. How are it, boss?"

He turned carelessly to Ullman. It looked as though Manuel had his chance just then; but he had measured his man, and had no confidence in himself as a snapshot. For an attack with fist or knife the Kid believed himself ready.

Manuel being face to face with the bar had been able to see better what was behind it, and had noted that though Vance was quiet, he was watching affairs with a curious smile. The wonder was the proprietor of the saloon had not already uttered a warning, though Vance seldom called attention to the laws he had laid down at the start.

Quietly came the answer:

"I don't object to two gents settling things quick and lively if no lead goes wild, but I may as well tell you it's a brace game they will set up on you, and I'm a little curious how they want to work it."

The fact of the case was, Vance did not like the doctor, and had no love for any one connected with the Occidental.

"With pistols let it be," said Manuel.

"There is some courage in the thing. At any distance, and the closer the better."

"Suits me to a charm. Across ther table are about ther clostness I gin'rally prefer. Stan' back fur back, an' turn at ther word go, an' let drive. How does that strike yer, pard?"

"The back of Manuel never turns toward a foe. It is his face always. Face to face."

"Tain't much fur good looks, but I ain't prezackly a child, an' it can't skeer me. But it's throwin' away yer one chance."

"If thou darest, let there be but the one chance. Let there be but the one weapon, and fate to decide in whose hand it is to be."

"Ther funder it goes ther more interestin' it gits."

"One shot, and if that settles not the duel let knives end it, for to death must it be."

"Oh, git it all down fine. Range yer tables, load yer pistols, an' throw 'round fur deal. Git it all fixed up, an' then let me know. This hyer chin are beginnin' ter make me tired. I want ter rest."

"Rest shalt thou soon have, but it will be in the grave. Tomasso is my friend; name one for thyself, who shall see that ali is fair."

"Oh, I dunno ez I keer ter bother ary one here ter go ter trouble fur a stranger. Tomasso might work fur me, too, an' that'd be fair fur one ez t'other. An' I wouldn't mind payin' him livin' wages fur ther time. I couldn't ask him ter do it fur nothin', could I now?"

"Come, now, old man, don't put on quite so many frills," interposed the Sport from Denver, who had been lounging to one side.

"Tomasso might be a healthy gentleman to have on your side, and then, again, he mayn't, and I wouldn't advise you to be runnings the risks. If you can't make a better suggestion I'll take it out of your hands, and attend to the details myself. You and Perez are talking about having an element of luck in it, and I'm an authority on such things."

"Thankee, pard. I couldn't have axed a better man ef I'd gone twicte 'round ther room. You let him have his own way but see thet he sticks ter what he sez. Then I'll know how ter meet him, an' it's all I wants."

"So it's a square deal. You'll get the cards as they ought to come to you or I'm not Charley Turner. Tomasso, step to the front, and we'll fix this thing in no time."

Tomasso glided out from the crowd without having to be called twice.

He looked as cruel and treacherous as did Manuel, but his face lacked the lines of courage that a student could trace in that of his principal.

"Little is there to do. Across the table the one who fires cannot miss. Manuel has his own pistol—there is but one bullet in it, for the barrel is single. Let the other take all the balls from his save one. I will hold the one, thou shalt hold the other. Place the men on either side of the table, and let them draw cards, or throw dice, and the one who wins, to him hand a weapon. Then count three, and the unlucky man shall die. Manuel is a fool, but such was the game he chose, and it is not my head in range."

"All seems to be fair enough, though what Manuel wants to use such a blunderbuss for at close range, is more than I can see. It carries a ball four times as heavy as that of my man, and you could put a fist through after it when he potted Bark Barber."

"Let the man who wins the shot use the weapon of the other!" called out Manuel. "If I had but a needle I would let his life-blood out for that blow, and I ask no advantage. If I win the shot 'tis enough."

There was something in what the sport said, about the disparity in calibers, but he was not sure he had done the right thing in calling attention to it. This was one of the times when a miss was well-nigh an impossibility, and yet he was not altogether satisfied.

He might have expressed himself to that effect, but the crowd, as if wearied with the preliminary sparring, took it up.

"That's ther talk! Kim off ther perch! Git down ter biz!"

"Let it go fur that," chimed in the Kid.

"It's good ez wheat an' it's me ez hez ther run ov luck."

After that the preliminaries took but little time.

Two or three tables were hastily shoved together and the Kid from Kirby was stationed on one side of them, while Manuel faced him from the other.

With whatever coolness Manuel may have undertaken the assassination there was no question about his feeling in the matter now.

He glared at his antagonist, and there was murder in his eyes. The mark left by the fist of the Kid did not improve his looks, either.

The third side of the table was occupied by the Sport from Denver, while Tomasso stood on the fourth.

"Now pitch yer bones, an' le'ss see who's ther winnin' man. Hyer they be!"

A man edged through the crowd, holding a box and dice, and placed them in Charlie Turner's hand. Some one else supplied the same to Tomasso.

It looked as though the real duties of the seconds were beginning. Each examined the dice of the other, and after a few trials seemed satisfied they were true. Then, they placed the two boxes in the hands of the principals, and straightened up to watch the coming throws. The real chances of the duel were to be tempted then and there.

With a greedy silence men moved up and craned their necks over to catch a glimpse of the little cubes when the boxes were raised.

"Only one throw each," sternly suggested the sport, "and the highest total takes the pot."

The dice rattled, the boxes came down on the table with a thump, and then were slowly and simultaneously lifted.

"Sixes," said the Sport from Denver, as coolly as though they had been pitching for pennies on a rainy day.

"Give my man the pistol."

Manuel had lost, and though the spectators had seen more than one duel to the death, something like a shiver ran through the crowd as Manuel braced himself, and the Kid from Kirby coolly turned his back to the Mexican.

"One—two—three! Fire!"

CHAPTER XIII.

RECRUITING AN ARMY.

MANUEL had objected to turning his back on his foe, but the Kid from Kirby had not withdrawn his proposition, and no one said a word to hinder. It was only Charlie Turner who understood just what it meant.

At the signal the Kid wheeled in his tracks, but his gun came up in a singular manner, for he held it by the barrel, and extending himself over the table he delivered a crushing blow upon the head of the Mexican, striking with the iron-bound butt.

At the same time a shot rung through the room.

"Foul play!" yelled a half-dozen voices, and the men whom the Kid from Kirby had already marked pushed forward.

"He give ther Greaser no chance fur ter use his knife!"

"Knocked him down f'ust, an' shot him arterwards!"

"Lynch him!"

"Hang him!"

It looked as though they were about to tear the Kid limb from limb, for the howl was savage, and it seemed as though the entire crowd was on the forward move. Had they been dealing with curs it is easy telling what would have happened.

Kirk King never hesitated, and he had a man beside him.

Each with a bound was on the tables, and confronting the men who were so clamorous for blood.

"Hold hard, thar, gents!" exclaimed the Kid, holding the pistol in one hand and waving his hat with the other.

"Jest a word ov truth afore you fellers kim in ter git yer gruel. I sent my bullet in butt-end furmost acause—he played me foul, an' thar wa'n't no lead in it. Ef ther cap's bu'sted on this hyer iron I'll agree you kin hang me an' I'll never kick."

A scornful laugh went up from half a dozen throats; and it sounded as though it had come from twice as many. A rush should have followed, yet it did not.

If Kirk King had stood there alone it might have been they would have tried to tear him

down. He was a stranger, and as yet had shown but little of what he could do, and was a no account looking giant to boot.

But right alongside of him stood Charlie Turner. He was saying nothing, but he was silently facing the crowd in a way that made some of them feel uncomfortable.

They knew him, and that not a snap shot could be taken, or a hand raised, that he would not see. No weapon was there in sight, but in the twinkling of an eye he could shake out a pair of double derringers from some hidden receptacle, and shoot to the breadth of a hair. It was as well to listen to what he might have to say.

Under that steady stare men grew silent, and when he did talk they all listened.

"Men, I reckon you know I'm not hunting chips to knock off people's shoulders, but that when I do commence to chip into a game I'm ready to go my whole pile if the cards seem to call for it."

"This party here is a pretty hard looking nut, but I've undertaken he should receive fair play, and by the rolling wheels he'll get it. If Manuel attempted to juggle with him so much the worse for Manuel, and there's nothing to hang the Kid for."

The fact that Manuel lay in their way had perhaps something to do with the checking of the rush. By this time, Tomasso and several of his friends had dragged the luckless Mexican away to a convenient bench and were examining him. If his skull was not cracked it was a wonder.

He lay as though dead, and nearly every one thought he was dead. Tomasso proclaimed so in a voice loud enough to be heard all over the room, while some one added:

"That war the same gun ther poor feller shot Mart Mallock with, an' ef ther stranger didn't know how ter handle it it are his own fault. He orter found out afore ther fun bergun."

"Ef thar warn't no lead in it war I ter fool 'round tell he got his knife out? All I'm a-askin' is fur yer ter make sure ther cap's thar, an' ther powder's thar, but he jest tricked ther ball out, an' I'm bettin' now ez I kin show ther way it war done. A'rter that, squar' men 'll keep out, an' ther rest kin pile in ez fast ez Vance Ullman 'll let 'em. I ain't a-beggin' fur meself, but I'm a-sheddin' tears fur you."

"And if this riot keeps up much longer I'll be taking a hand in myself," interjected Vance Ullman, from his favorite position behind the bar.

"It's spoiling business, and the stranger has the right pig by the ear. I saw the man who fired that shot, and he didn't intend to miss our friend from Kirby, either. Give the Kid a chance, or take the three of us. The fellow who shot will keep; I've got him marked."

Ullman's voice was clear and piercing, and reached every ear in the saloon.

It had its effect. With two such good men on the side of the stranger it was no wonder he was accorded a hearing, or that the story of the Kid was received with belief by the fair-minded.

When he showed there was no bullet in the pistol, and explained how the trick was worked, Manuel's stock was further below par than ever, and his friends saw it was too late to get in the work they had attempted.

The Mexican was carried off to where he could receive better attention, while Charlie Turner and the Kid leaped down from the table, and fearlessly mingled with the crowd.

However much the explanation had quieted the would-be lynchers, Kirk King knew they were thirsting for his blood just as much as ever, and only held their hands because they could go no further with safety. The intention had been to kill him openly, but with such a shadow of justification that there would be no danger of afterclaps.

Now, the leader of the game was out of the way for some time, but there were enough left, and they would be apt to try to finish the work in some treacherous way. He would have to continue on his guard at all times.

"All ther same," he muttered to himself with a shrug of the shoulders, "I got ther crowd down fine, and thar ain't a face thar I won't know ernough ter look out fur ef I'm a-meetin' ov it in a lonesome place arter sun-down."

There was some drinking at the bar, some

talk which was more or less warlike, and then the excitement died away with decidedly less damage than had been looked for.

The Kid did not wait for all this to happen, but after a few moments of waiting to show he was in no hurry to leave his dangerous company, he sauntered into the other room, and began to watch the games with a solemn interest, as though he might be yearning for a hand.

When, after a little, the Sport from Denver came near, he gave him a glance which the sport imagined to be one of invitation.

He answered it with a short laugh and a shake of the head.

"Sorry to disappoint you, old man, but it wouldn't do. I'll admit I was aching to have a hack at you when I saw you gather in the shekels at Ullman's bank, and I thought I'd save you up for my own private picking, but to-night it wouldn't do."

"How?"

The Kid questioned after the guttural fashion of an Indian chief, and not very good-humored in his looks, either.

"Oh, there's not much fun about me, and when I start in I want to play the limit, and stay there till one side or the other goes broke. And how would that look after the way I was backing your game this evening? Fact is, I'll give you a little bit of advice that may be good for your wholesome, and then draw out. The best thing you can do is to stroll around a bit to keep your credit up, and then go home. You got through once to-night by the skin of your teeth, and if they come back on you later on they'll be apt to make the raffle."

"Thankee, pard. Yer means well, but yer don't seem ter ketch on to the fack thet no matter how I'm trav'lin' I take keer ov meself ez I go erlong, an' it's ther other fellers what's in danger."

"Oh you can hit, jab, and come again with the best of them, and I have no doubt your shooting is gilt-edge, but you don't seem to remember some men can hold very straight from behind. If you hadn't been on the jump to-night just when that party pulled trigger his lead would have found your knowledge-box."

"That's whar luck kims in. But I ain't goin' ter linger long, fur I reckon you hev it down fine. I got inter a good thing ter-day, an' I must 'member my pards ef I don't keer fur meself. When I gits on my pu'ple an' fine linnin they won't be so apt ter be tryin' snide games on the Kid. But, reely, I ort ter make a record hyer, afore I settles down."

"Never mind the record if you can put money in your purse. After the little sample they have seen the boys will take you on trust."

"Mebbe yes, but that 'minds me. I want ter git half a dozen good men, thet are squar' ez times go, ter begin work at ther Copper Bottom. Kin you put me onto 'em?"

"I just can. Johnny Seams quit work on the Eldorado to-day, and his gang are out for a job. They will do to start with, and over yonder is Johnny now."

"Then, jest ez a favor, pard, kin you ax him ter kim over to ther Lion in erbout half an hour, ter see a man? Do it keerless like, an' tell him ter keep mum. Ef it war knowed it might throw things endways."

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EMPTY CABIN.

IN spite of his braggadocio, Kirk King could be as prudent as the best of them, and Boot Jack knew nothing of his interview with Johnny Seams, or the engagement which followed, until after they had been duly installed at the Copper Bottom.

And just when and how they were placed there was more than the outside world could have explained, though it was simplicity itself.

They went out the next morning before daybreak, and dropped into the shaft without interference.

They were by no means certain they were working for the interests of the actual owner, and sometimes suspected they were being paid to jump the property of Dave Brady. They were just the sort of men Kirk King had asked for. They were honest

as times go, and would stick to the fortunes of the man who paid them.

The Kid from Kirby found enough to do to fill up the morning.

He had to judge what ought to come next from his observations, and then start things running. He had promised Dave Brady he would try and see him some time that day, but since he had learned more of the desperate way he might expect to be fought he was not sure it would be good to leave the mine until he found out what was to be the next move.

So, the day wore on, and there were no further developments.

Not from the outside, at least, though Johnny Seams said he never saw a hole in the ground which seemed to be more likely to pay for the digging of it a little deeper. And Johnny knew a good prospect when he saw it.

"Looks ez though things war runnin' 'bout right," said King, when the afternoon had pretty well advanced.

"They're a-movin'."

"Think yer got ther nerve ter nang on hyer ef they kin over frum ther Occidental?"

"Long ez I'm inside. Tell they git ther law on me they know my claim are jest ez good ez ary other, an' all ther corpses ez are piled up are paid for. You bet I kin hold on."

"Then, do it! I ought to go up an' take a look at Dave. He 'peared yisterday like he would be 'round in a day er so, but you can't allers take looks fur gospel when a man hez a hole nigh ther liver."

"You sure Dave wants ter see you?" asked Johnny, with a shade of suspicion in his tone.

"See hyer, Seams, don't you git it inter your head this ain't a square deal; 'cause it are. Dave an' me war pards at 'wayback, an' we opine ter run tergether yit. Ef he comes hyer you'll find that what he says goes an' ef he tells yer ter march out, you march. Ther blamed gerloots he thort he hed hyer watchin' things hez skipped, er we wouldn't 'a' found things a-lyin' open. Thar's jest one thing ter caushun ye about."

"Thar are a caushun, then," said Johnny with a smile.

He was not sure but that he had half-suspected what was coming at last.

"It's jest this. Thar's a cuss slinkin' 'round these hyer regions they call Crazy Coon. I want ter give him a fair shake; an' yit I don't want you ter run too much chances, fur he seems ter want ter slaughter. Ef he comes good humored, treat him nice; but ef he reely shows murder, try an' rope him, an' hold him till I comes. I can manidge him like putty an' it'll save a heap ov trouble. It's allers blamed bad luck ter kill a loony."

"You got onto that a'ready? Most ov ther boys don't take much stock in ther yarn about him, but somehow I allers did think thar might be s'uthin' in it. I'll treat him white ef he'll let me."

"That's all, then. I'll find out more about his story afore I git done; so long."

He went up out of the shaft, and this time cared nothing whether he was seen or not, but boldly made his way toward the trail which led up to the cabin on the mountain-side.

As he went along he puzzled his brains to make out why Dave Brady had built his shanty up there instead of down near the mine; or, if he had built it before he became owner of the Copper Bottom, why he had not changed his location.

There was one reason which might account for it, and that was, the capacity of the place for defense.

Moreover, in case there was occasion for retreat, there was a way open down the other side of the mountain, and having traveled over it he was aware of the fact that Brady, if he so chose, could, with little trouble, barricade the path behind him.

"Looks ez though David war afeard ov s'uthin', but ef it's ary more than Doc Andrews an' his gang I'll never tell till I know more. Thar's on'y one thing I'm dead sure about it. He ain't in no condishun now fur a foot race, an' he ain't bin much better off ez fur ez a f'out might go. I'll pump him judishus, fur mebbe thar's s'uthin' that I orter keep an eye open fur. Little Misch'if

are a good one, but ef it come ter knives an' shootin' I shouldn't think she'd be ov much force."

As the reader has already learned, the girl was something of a mystery to him, and all he knew of her was what he had seen during his two visits to Dave Brady's cabin.

He was thinking these things over as he climbed the trail, but his senses were as much on the alert as usual, and he suddenly stopped and threw a revolver to a ready as a man came around the bend, just a little ahead of him.

He might not have been so quick to produce a weapon had it not been for the fact that he caught sight of the muzzle of a Winchester before the person who carried it came into view.

There was no use in being so cautious, however, for the new-comer halted suddenly, gave one glance, and then swung the rifle over his back by its strap, and held up both hands.

The action was a surprise, though just what he had been willing should be done; and the man was Crazy Coon.

Kirk King slung his pistol away with equal rapidity. It seemed his influence continued, and it would not do to let the lunatic know he doubted the fact.

"Hello, Crazy! Loafin' 'round hyer ag'in? Don't yer think you better keep outen temptashun?"

"I remember."

"Mebbe you remembers a heap too much. I war lookin' fur you ter turn up at ther mine. We're gittin that a-goin' in great shape."

"I was coming. There is blood up there, too. Perhaps you will be blind, but Crazy Coon can see it, knee deep. If he is your friend you had better come sooner."

The lunatic pointed up the trail and then looked boldly at Kirk King.

He wanted his intelligence to be believed, and he challenged inspection.

The Kid from Kirby heard him with a start. If there had been red work at the cabin, knowing the murderous attempt Crazy Coon had made the day before, how could he help but think it had been renewed? His glance was a question understood as well as though it had been spoken.

"Men have been there, but Crazy Coon was not with them. He lives yonder in the rocks but he would not have been here had he not seen there was no smoke to-day. Look and his footprint will not be found; the blood was not spilled by his hands."

King did not linger to ask further, for he doubted if he could wring anything reliable from those lips, willing as they seemed to be to speak.

With a gesture of anger he hurried away to see for himself.

The cabin was there, and the door was open as he approached, but he could see no signs of life, and though he called Dave Brady's name there was no answer.

Hastily he entered and looked around.

The bed in which he had left Dave was empty, and the hat of the girl no longer hung from the nail where Kirk had last seen it. Things had a desolated air, though there were no marks of a fray.

"Suthin' hez happened, but what?" he asked himself as he looked around.

"Ef Dave war lyin' thar, dead in his bed, I'd be apt ter say ez it war Crazy ez got away with him. But how he done it thar's no sign ov, an' I better look funder afore I make up my mind."

It was hard to find anything to point the manner or cause of the disappearance.

It did not seem possible Dave had gone of his own accord, but there was nothing to show a struggle, or that the body had been carried away.

Had Coon had anything to do with the matter there would have been visible the blood of which he spoke, for the young man would not have the wit to so thoroughly conceal his work. Nor could he have carried both bodies away so carefully that no drop of blood, or trail on the ground, would be left to show.

"Ef he hed gone hisself he'd hev left some word fur me; an' yit, it looks mighty much like it, onless I kin git a glimpse, somewhar, ov Doc Andrews's fine hand. Looked ez though he hed ez big a contrack ez he wanted las' night when he war strug-

glin' with yourn truly, but who kin tell? Ef Dave slid out, ez maybe he did, he won't want no hullabaloo riz, an' I'll see funder afore I make more fuss."

Crazy Coon had followed him to the place.

He stood outside, and his face expressed little of curiosity, but seemed rather to belong to one who was patiently waiting.

"Kim in, Crazy, but step lightly. Your eyes may be keener than mine. See ef you kin tell me how they left."

Coon stepped gingerly forward. He evidently had no fear, superstitious or otherwise, nor did he appear aware that Kirk was studying his face intently, trying to read the little that was written there.

Since entering the cabin it had certainly changed. He was only intent on solving a puzzle, the depths of which he hardly had the brains to comprehend. King knew the cunning with which a madman is usually credited, but he did not believe it could deceive him in such a matter. Crazy Coon was innocent here, whatever he may have been elsewhere.

The condition of affairs which had puzzled the one baffled the other. After a little they came out and went searching along the trail.

Still, no signs

Down along the narrow road they went, now and then stopping and stooping. Unfortunately, there was no dust there, that might show a foot-print, and it would have been hard for the Kid to tell just what sign he looked for.

He stopped, at length, nearly on the spot where he had stood when Lillie dropped to his arms from the ledge above. First, he let his eyes roam upward. Then, he turned, and leaning over, gazed far downward, at the jagged rocks below. Nothing strange was there to see, and he partially turned his glance over his shoulder, looking backward at the trail.

And as he turned he saw Crazy Coon springing toward him with outstretched hands, and a strange look in his wild eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

SHORT-CARD CHARLIE INTERVIEWED.

CHARLIE TURNER was not at all charmed over the part he had taken in it when, the next morning, he thought over the affair at the Tiger.

He was a sport at large, and willing to take a fly at anything which came along, but for the most part he played a lone hand. As a general thing, too, he was soft as silk, and not given to treading on other people's toes unless they first tramped on his.

He could hardly understand what limited species of insanity had led him to back up the game of the Kid from Kirby in such an uncalled for manner.

"It must have been," he thought, "that he got my sympathy from his being alone, and my respect for his being a blamed good man, but why the hades should I have commenced to kick before any one had a hoof pointed my way? If they had had him down, and been prancing over him, it might have been well enough; but, confound him, he was all the time on top. Why couldn't I let him alone till the other fellows had their turn. Now, it's dead sure I'll have to be bucking against Doc Andrews and all of his gang without making a red cent out of it. I'm disgusted."

That was the way he talked to himself when he came out to the breakfast table, and learned that the Kid had eaten an early meal, taken his dinner with him, and started out before any of the other boarders were stirring.

It was a little aggravating for him to hear more or less of comment upon his part in the row of the night before; and to receive a friendly warning or two to look out for himself if Manuel ever recovered enough to be up and around for business.

As he strolled out into the street he was unaware of the fact that Miss Cathcart was looking at him from the further end of the hall; nor did he know that a few minutes later she stepped out of the Lion and followed in the direction in which he had gone for a constitutional.

Of course, the sport knew Miss Miriam was sojourning in Boot Jack on a mission.

About there his knowledge stopped. He did not know she had caused him to be interviewed, and had decided he could not help her any.

He was not exactly the style of a man—at least in her eyes—with whom she wanted anything directly to do until she was sure there was something to be gained thereby.

There was a handsome devil may-care look about him that might have attracted many women, but which had no charm for her. She would rather have promenaded the whole town hanging on the arm of the Kid from Kirby, than be seen to nod once to Short-Card Charlie. She would not be so likely to be misunderstood.

But this morning it seemed to her possible she had been mistaken.

She thought she had read Charlie Turner pretty thoroughly; and believed he would not have been so ready to stand by a stranger.

The two men might not be willing to pose as old friends—she could understand the reason why—but when the pinch came they stood together.

And if they had known each other in the past, what was the matter with their having had a mutual acquaintance with Hugh Cathcart?

The sport might be a bad man from Denver, but he certainly could assume the manners of a gentleman, and she decided she would speak to him herself.

So, she set off on her walk, fully equipped to conquer, if need be, and a very dainty damsel did she appear, and the man who did not give her all the information she asked for must either know nothing, or have a heart of stone.

Charlie walked to the limits of the town, and then turned to come back, when he found himself face to face with the charming boarder at the Lion, who gave him a nod and a pleasant smile.

His hat was up in an instant, though he was pretty well satisfied she had more reason for noticing him than his own good looks.

"Pardon me, Mr. Turner, but perhaps you have heard I am not staying in this classical town solely for the sake of my health. Could I have a few words with you on my own business?"

"A thousand of them," was the gallant answer.

"I have understood you had a mission, though what it was no one seemed to know. I have time at my disposal by the ocean, and the most willing heart you ever heard of. What can I do for you?"

"Answer a few questions. I am not sure you can tell me anything I desire to know, but it would not be strange if you could, since I understand you are well acquainted with all the region of country roundabout here."

"Know it like a book, miss. There is hardly a camp to be named in this section where I have not risked my money or my life, or both. Of course, you are aware of my business?"

"I have been told. But what led me to speak to you was your intimacy with a stranger who goes by the name of the Kid from Kirby. Is it true that you knew him elsewhere?"

Turner hesitated, and a perplexed look came into his face.

"I have known him something like thirty-six hours. If it will be any special accommodation to you I shall be happy to shoot him. What has he been doing?"

"Thanks. If that is as far back as your knowledge goes I have nothing further to say. Excuse me for having troubled you, and consider my question confidential."

"Certainly. But there is one thing I might add. Before he struck this camp I had heard of him, and though he is a rough-looking case, and a queer looking case, the man who picks him up for a fool will be apt to drop him for something else. A better man or a squarer pard never drew breath. When he gets his heavy harness on some folks will say he don't miss being good looking by so very much."

"Then your offer was hardly intended to be accepted. You would not care to send such a man out of existence at the simple request of a stranger?"

"Not unless he deserved it; and there are some persons whose request presupposes a great deal. The fact is, just when you

spoke I was a little out of humor with him for roping me into his side game. The Kid is nothing to me, yet every man, woman and child in the burg will be willing to swear he is an old pard. And that sort of notion is not going to do me any good if I want to continue living at peace with my neighbors. Why, you must know how it is yourself?"

Charlie Turner was fresh and airy, but respectful, and Miss Miriam felt perfectly at home with him before he had uttered his second sentence. At his appeal she laughed good-naturedly.

"Yes. Had I not thought you knew something about him and his friends I would hardly have addressed you. He was able to tell me a little; I was in hopes I could find some one who would say a great deal."

"Perhaps I can," was the prompt answer.

"The Kid has led a harum-scarum sort of life, of course, but there's nothing in it to send him to State Prison. If he has any actual friends they are pretty much the same stripe."

"Then, perhaps, you knew a man by the name of Thorne, who lived in a town called Alaska."

Turner's careless smile disappeared, and there was a shadow of trouble in his face, as he answered:

"Perhaps I did, but I never knew he was a friend of Kirk King."

"He was shot, I believe."

"He was so reported."

"Was the cause of the shooting one which will bear mentioning?"

"Oh, yes. It was quite the proper thing. Woman in the case, though I don't know that either professed to be much struck on her. One word brought on another, and they pulled together. Both of them were subjects for the coroner a minute later, or so the crowd thought, for they rose with a howl, and had a regular Donnybrook Fair. Alaska was a city the evening before, but if the census had been taken the next morning the man with the statistics would have thought it wasn't much of a town after all."

"The same story he told me; the same story," said Miriam, impatiently.

"Both of them buried, the man with the longest arms and the biggest revolver administered on their effects, and the world went 'round on wheels, the same as it had done before."

"You have caught on the western ways of things, but you are not altogether correct. One of them went under for good, all right enough; but if I am not wide off, the other came around in good time, and I've never heard of his being dead again."

"And the one was Hugh Cathcart! I knew I would be on the right trail when I spoke to you. Something told me so. Hugh Cathcart lives!"

"He may live, for all I know. He certainly did not go up on that load of poles. He was not in it, at all."

"Not in it? Did you not tell me that Thorne—describe him."

"Easy done. Tall, gray eyes, brown hair, step like a panther's, weight about a hundred and sixty, and age say, thirty-five. He was very dead."

"And the other man, the one who killed him? You are sure he did not ever bear the name of Cathcart?"

"Very sure."

"You speak confidently, and yet, how can you know?"

Miss Miriam was excited, and let it be seen, but Charlie Turner was cool as usual, as he answered with due deliberation:

"I ought to know, for I am the man who dropped Thorne; I shot him myself. There was a Hugh Cathcart, but he went South a year ago, and as far as I know, has never been heard from since."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DOCTOR HEARS IT, STRAIGHT.

"I do not understand," gasped Miriam, staring at the man before her with something like horror.

"What had he done to you, or what had you done to him, that you could—but, I forgot. You said there was a woman in the case."

"A woman it was; and yet, not a flesh and blood woman. It was the queen of spades.

He had the four gentle ladies, and I had a straight flush, so you see she was an important card, and when we showed down neither of us stopped to consider, but both let drive. One of the boys remarked afterward, it was a lively time over one woman, and before long every one remembered the riot, and nobody knew much about the rights of the case, and so, we let it go at that. He ran his chances when he raised that queen, and luck turned against him."

"You must have known something about him to be able to say so positively that Thorne was his true name."

"I did, indeed, and I ought to have been kicked for dropping into a game with him. I had been dodging it for two or three years. Oh, I knew him well enough, but the trouble was he didn't know me."

"Yet this Kid from Kirby thinks it was a friend of his, and described him as a man to tie to."

"If that is so, madam, it would be an accommodation if you consider what I have said as confidential until he gets straightened up on it."

"If this be so, he can be nothing to me. It is Hugh Cathcart I am searching for. You have given me a pointer, and it is in accord with one I had before. I was thrown off the track by the story of the trouble at Alaska. Now, tell me how I can learn what became of Cathcart, and I will be everlastingly your debtor."

"Wish I could, madam. Down South is a big country, and it swallows up a lot of men that you never hear of again, or if you do they bob up in quite a different section of the country. Asia, for instance; or some where along the sources of the Nile. They don't very often get back here after they once turn up missing."

"And you think he is dead; it seems to me I can tell that much from your tone."

"I don't think much about it, but I'd take two to one if I could see any earthly way to settle the bet. If you truly want to see him, go home and wait till he drops you a line. And if it's the other way, strike the nearest town where there's a paper, and serve a notice by publication. And now I think of it, that's the best way, anyhow. If he don't come it's a sign he's dead, or ain't worth fetching."

Miriam's face flushed a little, for she was aware that the Sport from Denver gave her a searching glance, though it was sidewise, and altogether incidental as it appeared.

"Thanks. Your advice is better, even than you know, though it is not likely I will take it. Forgive me for troubling you about my own affairs, and unless you can give me the names of Cathcart's companions when he left Gordon's Gulch—I heard of that expedition before, you see—I will trouble you no further."

"Sorry I am, but I know nothing further than I told you, and that only came to me by chance. A side pard of mine mentioned having seen such a party at the Gulch, and without giving names told me who the leader was. He was a man with whom my pard had had some dealings once, which turned out uncomfortable—and served him right. If I can help you at all, at any time, you understand I am at your disposal. Until then I am just where you put me."

He raised his hat gallantly, and stood waiting for orders. Though she knew he had one killing on his hands, and possibly a dozen more, she thought, as she bowed to him a little stiffly, that she rather preferred him to Doctor Andrews, after all.

"Thank you," she said, frankly.

"Unless you can remember or learn something more of Hugh Cathcart I do not know that you can be of further service—you have done me a great one already. For the present, I have no time to make friends, so you will not misunderstand me when I bid you good-morning."

And she accompanied this blunt dismissal with a sad little smile, and a nod, which drew the sting, if there was any, from her words.

Turner passed on, while she wheeled, and went back to Boot Jack.

"Wonder what the doctor would say to that if he heard it?" was his thought, as he stepped jauntily away.

"Or does he reckon that don't apply to a man who is a little more than a friend?"

Anyhow, he would be apt to think I was trying to poach on his preserves. If things keep running this way he will have it in for me, good. And me all the time only trying to make an honest living."

People express curiosity, now and then, about things, when they really don't care to have that curiosity gratified.

It was pretty much that way in this case.

Charlie Turner did not want to hear what the doctor really would say, and would a good deal sooner only imagine it. It was as much to his disgust as surprise that, before he had taken a taken half a dozen steps, he discovered the doctor had possibly heard, and probably would have something to say about it.

He was seated carelessly on a rock by the side of the trail, and there was a larger rock which had hidden him.

Perhaps he was skulking, and perhaps it was only chance, but, anyhow, he was not so far off that the voices of the two, in the utter silence which prevailed, could not reach him.

He nodded carelessly, and from all the sign he gave no one could tell whether he was in a bad humor or not.

"Been answering a few questions, have you?" asked the doctor.

"I have been under the rack myself, and know how it works. Wonder is, she didn't get round to you sooner."

"Keeping the best till the last, I suppose. Brought me in as a toothsome dessert. These young ladies who go into business have a little taste after all."

"Couldn't tell until I knew what sort of a meal she had been making. If you had anything to say about Hugh Cathcart you might as well have opened it out some time ago, when you were asked about him."

"Thanks, but I'm not a deputy sheriff, and I'm not given much to talk in such cases till I have seen the plaintiff."

"Not a bad theory, but sometimes, when you come to practice, it don't work so well. I have an interest in the quest of the young lady, myself, and I would like to know whether the information with which you have been loading her is to be relied on."

"Thanks for the insinuation. Does that mean fight? If it does I suppose I will have to refer you to the Kid from Kirby. He appears to know how to manage most things, yourself included."

"I am willing to take any meaning you choose out of it, and allow you the same privilege. At the same time you are mistaken if you think I want to crowd you. I only want to give you a warning."

"Don't try to be solemn, Doc. Spit out what you got to say and be done with it. You look as though you had something on your mind, and maybe I can help you."

Charlie Turner certainly did not try to avoid difficulty; but that was his way.

"I have this on my mind, and this only. You have managed to scrape up a speaking acquaintance at least with a young lady in whom I have a certain interest. So far, that is all right. I know about what questions she asked you, and doubtless she will tell me what were your answers."

"But right here is time for you to stop. When she comes your way I would advise you to go another. Let Miss Cathcart alone or you will hear from me. And when you hear it will be after a fashion you will despise."

"Thanks. You lay it down very straight, and if you really wanted me to have an interest in the young lady you could not have chosen a better way to start the notion. She was not in my line, and if she had so chosen I would not have been apt to speak to her, had she remained in the camp till the crack of doom. She thought I might be able to give her some information, and so I could and did. Whether she tells you what it was or not makes no difference to me, since it was for her benefit it was given, and she was welcome to make what use she chose of it. If you are in the same line of business you want to keep your end up or see me go ahead. I know a heap, and when the notion takes me am not slow about telling it. And the fact is, if you want to shoot, the sooner you begin the better. If you keep on in this strain you will drag Miss Cathcart's name into it, and that would be infernally low

after my lights on the subject, though I don't suppose you can see it in yours."

"You have said enough," said the doctor, white with rage.

"You will see that the lady's name will not be dragged in, and I will place you in such a position you will either have to fight, or leave the town."

"Nothing like keeping down your angry passions. I didn't think you could do it so well. But I guess I'm safe till Manuel gets well, and then I can look out. Much obliged for the warning, and meantime I guess I'll go along cultivating the young lady. She seems to be liberal-minded, and if she is sure the income is all right I don't believe she will object to the man."

"That's the benefit of having a good reputation," thought Charlie, as he strode away. "He wouldn't pull while I faced him, and he dared not shoot at my back, but after this I want to look out for his heelers."

CHAPTER XVII.

CAPTAIN SLYME TALKS BUSINESS.

THE Sport from Denver had guessed pretty shrewdly what the doctor would like to do; but he did not know how near he was to putting his wishes into effect.

"Curses on him!" growled Andrews, with a savage scowl; "He thinks I dare not fire at his back, but if I knew for a surety that he is bent on mixing in my game I would dare the risks. At this distance I could make a sure shot of it—and, by heavens, I've a notion to try it! There would be one out of the road, and his infernally handsome face haunts me. I'd like to spoil that cursed beauty, so that Miriam herself wouldn't know it."

His revolver was out, and he was holding it level with his waist, the muzzle trained on Charlie Turner. He had the exact range, and had practiced that kind of shooting.

Then he gave a short laugh, and dropped the muzzle, though he did not return the weapon to its scabbard.

"Of all fools a jealous fool is the worst. With a dozen ruffians ready to do the job for a handful of chips, I was almost idiot enough to run the risks just to get his face out of sight a shade sooner. I must be getting wild."

"Rather think you are, pard."

The voice was right at his elbow, and the doctor turned with a sudden start, his pistol hand rising instinctively. It looked as though the mania for shooting had not altogether left him.

"Oh, go a little slow," continued the voice, without a single touch of nervousness or fear in its jeering tones.

"You know if you really were to try it on in earnest I'd have you down before you could crook your finger. Of course, you are fair with the tools as long as you are in second rate company, but I hardly think you want to come my way."

"True as preaching," responded the doctor, as he hastily thrust the pistol away.

"You must make a little allowance for a man who is taken off his guard. Of course, when I saw who it was I knew better; but I wouldn't have cared for any one in Boot Jack to have heard me express my thought just then."

"But you oughtn't to express your thoughts if you don't want them heard. Great Scott! Suppose I were to get to talking out loud when I thought there was nobody around. How long would it be before some one would bob up from behind a bush, and take a sitting shot at yours truly?"

"Very true; but then, as I am not in the same line of business I have not made it quite so much a study to restrain my feelings."

"Come, come, old man! That's thin. You and I get all we can, and we're not particular how we get it, so we happen to want it. Where's the difference? I confess, I am a little more open about it; but that is the force of early education. If I had wanted that fellow out of the road I wouldn't have taken so much time to consider about it, and I certainly would not have thought about the fellow who would do the job for a handful of chips. I would have crooked my finger, and it would have been, good-morning. Really, now, how much will you give

me to have the job done? I'm open to an engagement."

"What is the matter with the stage coaches? Regular business must be getting poor."

The doctor gave a suspicious glance at his *vis-a-vis*.

"Oh, the old story. The empty traveler can whistle in the face of the robber, or something like that, as Horace hath it. If Captain Slyme and his worthy gang don't get some outside work to do they will be apt to go burst before long. Honor bright, the commissary department is so low that a square meal is the rarity nowadays. I am wasting away to a shadow, and my men are beginning to gnash upon me with their teeth."

"In that case I am not sure I am in safe company," laughed Andrews, his hand going into his pocket.

"Perhaps, like Captain Scott's coon, I had better come down."

"Oh, come now, you don't mean that. There is some honor among thieves, and I profess to be an exponent of the higher life. For the sake of old times, pard, don't be suspicious. I am not sure I could forgive it."

"For the sake of old times, if you need a friendly loan why don't you say so? Of course I am ready to help you over the ripple. I'm not supposed to know that Hart Thorne of half a dozen years ago has blossomed into the Captain Slyme of the present time. Will a hundred or two help you? That is all I have on me at present, but it won't be hard to let you have a little more."

"Thanks, but I'm not robbing my friends. I am liable to climb a tree at any moment and I wouldn't care to go off the hooks owing you. But, if you actually want that little job done, I wouldn't mind accepting a hundred on account and coming in from the woods long enough to attend to the business. I have done no business in the immediate neighborhood and can pass for a British capitalist, or something of that sort. I'll show you how he ought to be drilled before tomorrow morning."

Captain Slyme talked as coolly about it as though he were proposing to go rabbit-hunting.

"You have your men where they are available?" asked the doctor, as he drew a few twenties from his wallet, and gave a swift glance around before placing them in the hands of his companion.

"Oh, yes, a dozen of them; but you don't suppose I want to rush them into town just to get away with Charlie Turner?"

"Ah, you know him, do you?"

"It would be strange if I didn't. Everybody does. He is a very good man when you get him to going, but this time I think I can fire a shade the soonest."

"I haven't a doubt of it, but—see here, Thorne. If you have no reason for coming into Boot Jack beyond ridding me of the Sport from Denver I could use you to a great deal better advantage elsewhere. Besides, I am not sure he is so much in my way. It was just my infernal nonsense. There is another man—but I have provided for him."

"Handful of chips, eh? Well, I expect to slaughter Turner some day on my own account, if you won't pay for the doing of it; but that can wait. What is this other job, and how much is there in it? You know I have got to make things straight with the boys—since you seem to expect to use them. They have a vote on all contemplated raids, though after that I am a perfect Czar of all the Russias. While I played a lone hand, of course it would be different."

"See here, Thorne, I'm not exactly made of money, though I rate fairly well in financial standing at Boot Jack. I have been scattering a few chips already, and have promised more. I am not doing this without expecting to have them all come back, but I must have enough at my elbow to meet an unexpected raise. How little would appear an object to that game of yours?"

"They come moderately high, old man. I don't think they would care to move for much less than a thousand in a lump, to be divided among the survivors after the fun is over."

"Oh, I can manage that, and have something over for you besides. You used to find me pretty square, didn't you?"

"With me, yes."

"Well, I'm not afraid to trust you with my game. There is half a million in the distance, and I am willing to do a heap of wading to reach it. I am not going to offer to share it with you, or any of that kind of rot, but I'll give you a cool ten thousand for yourself, and another thousand for your gang, besides the money down, if you will help me to pull it off. It will be at least a year before I can touch the principal even if things go for the best, but it won't take long to assure success, and when that is done I'll provide for your payment."

"I'd agree to do twice the work for half the money, and you haven't told me yet what it is to be. Suppose you open out."

"In the first place, there is a man and a girl, living up on the mountain, pretty much like hermits. As far as I know there is no one interested in them except a wandering tough, who has made a host of enemies since he has been here, and who is liable to go over the range at any moment. That man and girl ought to disappear."

"Just why?"

"Because, if they don't they may stand between me and the half million."

"A very good reason. Consider it done. What next?"

"There is a lady in the camp who may have to disappear also. If so I want to see that she goes where I can find her. It might be a good thing if she and I went together, and were captured by a band of outlaws, and had various trials and tribulations. You have come upon me so suddenly I have not had time to think it all out, but I can arrange the scheme while I am getting that thousand dollars you want to have in hand."

"Consider all that done, also. What next?"

"Nothing, if other matters as planned work all right. If they don't you may have to come into town and finish off the sport after all."

"That will be done as we go along. Now, the name of the man of the mountain? Give me his location, also. There may be other men there, and the mountain is a big place."

"The name he goes under here is Dave Brady, and as I don't think you ever had anything to do with him it's not worth while digging out what it has been elsewhere."

"Dave Brady let it be. Meet me here with the thousand this afternoon at two and I'll tell you what the best scheme is, that I can hatch up."

CHAPTER XVIII.

CRAZY COON CAN BE BETTER THAN HE LOOKS.

THE sight which met the Kid from Kirby as he turned his face over his shoulder was one which might have unnerved another man, for it seemed as if Crazy Coon was about to dash him, if not both of them, to destruction.

There was perhaps a second between the instant of seeing this, and the young man's clutch on his collar, yet in that second he had time to save himself by the one way in his power—and refused to do it.

In a great emergency it was natural for his hand to go to the trigger of a revolver like clockwork, and he would have barely had time to stretch Crazy Coon at his feet with a bullet through the brain.

And yet he did nothing of the kind. His finger hesitated on the crook and then there was no need of it.

The hand of Crazy Coon tore at him; but it was to urge him away from where he was standing, and added to his own instinctive impulse was strong enough to fling him against the wall of rocks on the inner side of the trail, while at the same time he heard the report of a gun, and the whirr of a bullet.

Then, Coon was unslinging his own gun, and stepping out carelessly, to where he could again command a view of the rocks above.

As King staggered up, and stared at the lunatic he could not but admire the fearless grace with which he threw up his gun; but he was not ready to trust his judgment, for in fact, he didn't believe the young man had any.

"Shoot ter cripple, Crazy. Don't kill tell we see what we got in ther box!"

He was barely in time, but he saw the quick movement by which the aim was changed; and then followed the report.

The gun dropped down into the hollow of Coon's arm as quietly as though he had been shooting at duck, and Kirk knew he had not missed his mark.

A moment later he had evidence, if he had needed it.

From above there came strange cries, mingled with oaths in Mexican, and curses in English.

"His arm—it is broken at the shoulder. Had you not spoken it would have been through his heart. Shall he die, or will you look at him? He would have had your life had I not seen him. He does not fall like the girl did, and we must go up if you want to reach him."

"I'll hev ter trust you ter take me 'round; I ain't posted on ther way among ther rocks up thar. Better git a russel on, fer I don't want ther critter ter bleed ter death. Not until I git onto his game, nohow. He may know suthin' 'bout Dave."

"This way, then. Crazy Coon knows the ways and the trails. It will not be hard to reach him, and I will go first so that he cannot take a shot with his other hand till I have him covered."

It seemed to the man from Kirby that his lunatic had more than a grain of sense in regard to some things, and he followed him without hesitation, by a path which he might have had some trouble himself in finding.

He saw the man in ambush had a position which no one man could have turned from that side, without running the almost certain risk of death, and it was only an incautious disclosure which had enabled Coon to spot him from below. As the groaning and the cursing continued he advanced without hesitation, though it was his companion who saw the wounded man first, and promptly covered him with his rifle.

"Bless my soul, ef it ain't Tomasso, arter all! Let up on that, old man. I'll do you good if you'll let me; an' ef yer don't you'll be apt ter bleed ter death afore I kin git down to ther trail ag'in."

Tomasso had stopped his groaning, and was feeling vaguely with his left hand for a revolver. His gun lay beside him, where it had dropped from his hands when stricken by Coon's shot.

"First Manuel, and then me! Satan himself cannot slay them!" he gritted between his teeth.

"Better to die now than a little later on."

"You know best, but I ain't so sure ov it," was the grave answer of the Kid, as he stooped over the Mexican, and while he felt of his wounded shoulder with one hand, with the other dextrously relieved him of his weapons.

"It's a nasty break, Tomasso; but nothing a little time and gumstickum won't mend more er less. I won't say it'll ever be ez good ez new, but it'll be better than no arm at all. An' ef yer don't let me tend ter ye now ther bone 'll hev ter kim off ef we kin save yer life at all."

"In the fiend's name, attend to it then, if thou hast the courage. Sooner or later Tomasso will slay thee if he lives."

"I'll tend ter that part ov the circus when ther time kims," responded the Kid, without the least symptom of anger.

"I'm glad yer kin see I'm squar' ernuf ter trust me long ez yer can't do better. Arterwards you kin hev a reg'lar sawbones ter finish ther patchin', but I don't reckon he kin do yer better than I kin. It would 'a' bin my trade ef I hadn't bin switched off enter things that suit me better."

Kirk King had not forgotten Dave Brady, but that did not interfere with other work which came to his mind, and could not be deferred. He had Tomasso's shoulder exposed, and was following the course of the bullet before his explanation was half ended.

The bullet had made a clear passage, breaking the bone as it went along, yet after a hasty inspection Kirk did not believe the fellow's life was in any very great danger.

"Tomasso, ef you war a good, honist man, with er fambly 'pendin' on yer fur s'port, I might be afeared; but you're too w'uthless ter die anyhow, an' ther chances are in yer favor ef I kin git yer out ov hyer afore ther reackshun kims on. I've bundled

ye up some, an' now I'm goin' ter git ye down ter Brady's shanty. After that, I want er few facks in ther case, an' ef you won't give 'em it won't make no great differ'n's. You give me his name an' I'll send one ov yer pards ter look after yer, an' in a day er so you'll be out with yer arm in a sling, lookin' pale an' interestin'."

It was an ugly sort of a task, but one which Kirk King thought should be attempted, and the sooner the better.

Tomasso had been losing a good deal of blood, and had received a shock. This was no place to leave him, and Brady's cabin was the nearest, and the only place to which he could convey him.

There was risk enough about it, but Tomasso was in no condition to object, and if he had any thoughts on the subject, they were fears that the Kid from Kirby would not carry out his intentions. It was growing late in the afternoon, and to be left there would probably be his death. He was not too weak to see that.

There was danger enough in it, too; but Kirk King managed his burden as easily as many a man would have done a child, while Crazy Coon looked on in silent disapprobation.

King did not think it the fair thing to install the Mexican in the bed of the absent owner, but he made him a couch that would be fairly comfortable, placed a bucket of water by his side, and then looked him over critically.

"Guess I'll have to leave you, but I'll try and send one of your pards out if I can strike any, an' ef I can't I'll git some one else. In course I know what yer war squatting up thar fur, an' I can't feel jest ez sorry ez I m'out. Ef I tho't you could tell ther truth onder ary condishuns I'd ask yer whar Dave Brady are, but you'd jest say yer didn't know, an' I ain't got ther heart ter tortur' a cripple ter wring ther facks outen him. But, ef I find you hed ary hand in skullduggery with him, I'll come back on yer, an' kill yer sure."

The Mexican had been very quiet, and the Kid was turning away without expecting any answer.

"A momert. Thou hast been better to Tomasso than he would have been to thee and he will not lie. Some men might have carried him like a log; thou hast held him as though he were a child. I would have shot thee since it was why I dogged thy steps, and that thou knowest. But no evil have I done or intended to the man who lived here, nor has he come to any harm as I know it."

"Thanks, old man. I believe ye'r tellin' truth, a'rter all. Can you give a hint ez ter whar he's gone, an' why he went? It may save a heap ov time an' trouble."

"In the language of thy race, he hath lit out. Why, I know not, but he has gone, and taken the girl with him. This I know, as I knew that thou wast to visit him this day."

"Gone, eh! And left no word for me? Blamed strange, an' mighty hard ter swallow; but ef you say so pard—"

"Perhaps he thought if he left that word it might come to some one else, and I know that he went in fear."

"Like ez not he saw yer snoopin' 'round, an' thought ther doctor war comin' fur him ag'in; but it ain't like Dave ter be afeared ov ary one man, ef he hez ther biggest kind ov a gang behind him. He didn't talk that way yisterday."

"It was no fear for the doctor, but of something the girl told him. More than that I know not. He went on over the mountain, and that is all Tomasso knows."

"Thankee, ag'in. Yer needn't say 'nother word. He kin run his own meat wagon, an' when ther time kims he'll let me know what it's all erbout. So long. Fur a Greaser you ain't a bad kind."

Although, on general principles, he was not inclined to believe a word the Mexican would say, there was an accent of truth in Tomasso's voice which he could not get over, and he stalked slowly down the mountain-side running it over in his mind.

"War it Crazy Coon, er war it ther woman?" he asked himself.

"He wouldn't skeer fur hisself but he might be afeared fur Leetle Mischi'f; an' then ag'in, thar war ther lady. P'rhaps he didn't want ter break her heart all up, tellin'

her what he knowed about Thorne. He's a gentle sorter a feller, "when it lums ter that."

"He won't be apt ter go fur, an' with ther 'Copper Bottom' ter draw him, I'll hear frum him ef it's all right. Ef I war only sure thet it war right, I da'ssn't go monkeyin' too much 'round his trail er I might set some one on ther trail ez he wants ter keep off. Guess I'll hev ter stick to ther mine, an' let him take his own time ter 'xplain."

Crazy Coon was at his heels, and as King reasoned it all out he listened. Finally, he spoke:

"I can follow, and no one know. If he has gone down the mountain it will not be far before I strike his trail. How shall it be?"

"Go; but if you cut up any didoes—stand from onder."

He snapped his finger and thumb and Crazy Coon nodded. He understood the order and waited for nothing more.

While Kirk King descended the mountain on the one side, he was going down on the other, looking keenly around for traces of the fugitives.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BREWING OF A CYCLONE.

Kirk King was worried enough over the strange disappearance of his friends, but as he was inclined to believe Tomasso had told the truth it seemed more important than ever for him to hold on at the mine.

He had some doubts whether Crazy Coon was the safest person in the world to put on the trail of the missing pair, but then he knew the lunatic could follow it with less danger of being noticed than any one else, and until sufficient time had elapsed for him to make a report the Kid decided he would do nothing further himself in the matter, though he made his word good so far as sending assistance to Tomasso went.

He had forgotten all about Miss Miriam and her quest, and it was a surprise when, after supper, Billy Johnson asked him to step into the parlor and have a word with her.

He went, of course, and the first thing said to him was a still greater surprise.

"Do you know, I have found out to-day that the Thorne who was shot at Alaska was not the man who was once your pard? At least, he was not Hugh Cathcart, for that gentleman was alive when last heard of, and on his way on some uncertain expedition to the Southern country. How could you have made such a mistake?"

"A man's ez likely ter be wrong ez right when he bets on suthin' he can't see; an' this may be sich ov a case. I got it mighty straight; who war tellin' yer diff'rent?"

"A man with whom I know you have some acquaintance, Mr. Turner, the Sport from Denver. I met him by chance, and I found he knew more about Hugh Cathcart than any one I have yet interviewed."

"An' it war honest Injun? He don't look like a sport ez does his shootin' with his mouth. I jest told yer ther best I hed in ther shop, an' I ain't sayin' thet I war n't right. I give it to yer straight ez I got it from my old pard, an' I axed him 'bout it ag'in arter I seen you, ter make sure."

"Another one of the three?" asked Miriam, with an accent of surprise.

"Who was it? But I need scarcely ask. If he bears the same name he did in the old time it must have been David Brady."

"Kayrect you be; but it 'pears kinder sing'lar thet yer never dropped onto to him afore. He's bin hyer longer than you hev, ef I ain't mistook, an' posted ez you be I'd a' thank you'd a' 'membered ther name."

"But I never heard it! And it is strange. I thought I had gone over the name of every man in the camp, and located his past as well as his present. Do you think I would ever have neglected him? Where is he? It may be that Mr. Turner was wrong; and if he was—!"

She stopped suddenly, almost confused. She had just remembered Charlie Turner had confided to her in his light and airy way that he had shot the man who had been posing as Thorne at Alaska, and she had tacitly agreed not to mention the fact, while King continued to believe the defunct to have been his old time pard.

If the Sport from Denver had not been telling her the truth?

There might be some unpleasant complications; and she had no desire the Kid from Kirby should be in them.

The Kid was thinking, too.

It was possible the disappearance of his pard might be connected with this lady, and it did not seem exactly square to give away any more information than was necessary until he knew more about the affair than he did.

At the same time, if Dave wanted him to keep mum he should have given a hint; and he had an idea his pard was really equal to any emergency.

"It's on'y his counfounded narvousness, along ov his lyin' in bed fur a week er so. Ef it warn't fur that he'd face a hull reegiment ov skirt-y-coats, an' never wink wunst. Plain truth are ther best hand ter hold, though I ain't sayin' nothin' 'bout Lily onless she ackts me."

Miriam appeared to have forgotten her questions for the moment, and at length she looked up, repeating:

"I must see him; where will I find him?"

"Sorry, mum, but jest now I'm afear'd ye'r' too late. He's bin lyin' off with a hole in his side, but he's better now, an' hez gone ter look after biz. I can't say when he'll be back, but when he comes I kin let yer know."

"And such a thing could happen here without my knowing it! What could the doctor have been thinking of that he did not mention it to me?"

"Probably he war thinkin' ov what war goin' ter happen when Dave kim out ag'in, on ther war-path. I ain't sayin' it warn't a squar' deal, but it does seem queer thet he could git ther bulge on my pard, an' drop him 'thout a scratch hisself. He'd be too all-fired modest ter 'xplain it to yer, 'speshully ef he thort Dave war a man ez you war huntin'."

"Another murder—or the next thing to it!" exclaimed Miriam, with something like horror, as she clasped her hands.

"Blood everywhere, and always, just as I seem to be coming near to the trail. And what was this about?"

"Jest a racket, sich ez men git inter over an ace high, an' a pa'r ov spades. Dave, he are runnin ther Copper Bottom, er war gittin' riddy ter run it, an' ther doctor hez a centerest in ther Occidental, which are jest next door on ther vein. Some say ez he war anxious ter be 'p'inted Dave's 'ministrator, an' it looks a bit like that. We'll soon find out, for ef he war ever goin' ter jump ther claim he'll hev ter try to do it now."

"He shall not do it—not, at least, while Mr. Brady is away. I should think the whole town would rise to prevent it."

"Ther town hez ernough ter do with its own 'fairs," answered the Kid, dryly; "but I don't reckon he'll git furdur than ther shaft, ef he tries et on. I'm thar meself."

"I might have known it. Excuse me for doubting it. But if your friend comes back let me know at once. I would see him before I go, but I cannot wait more than another day. Then, I will go to learn something more of the man named Cathcart, who went South. His fate shall not remain a mystery."

"See hyer, miss. I can't think it war my old pard, but it may be. Ef I hed time I'd make sure ov it, but I'm looking out fur another pard, an' I can't throw up his job tell he gits back. It's only advice I kin offer, an' I won't give much ov that. Jest go slow. That's all."

"But when he comes—could I count on your assistance then? And I need not say I could well reward you for time and labor in my cause."

"Thankee; but I'd hev ter know a heap more about yer cause aforesaid, an' life, hyer, are mighty onsart'in. I got more friends 'round town than I kin shake a stick at, an' it ain't sure they won't down me. Ef they don't it won't be fur the want ov tryin'."

"Thanks. I might have known you would never forget a friend, or be willing to do what might be to his interest. I shall not ask you to aid me blindfolded. I would tell you all my story first, and after that you could decide. But I cannot do

it now. Perhaps there will be time and reason for it when we meet again. Good-evening."

Kirk King was very well satisfied to accept his dismissal, and went away without delay. He believed he had gained more information than he had given, and was glad of it. Miriam was handsome and fascinating, but he could not make up his mind altogether that she was to be trusted. He was glad it was not Dave Brady concerning whom she was inquiring. He was honest in all the answers he had given, but did not know yet that he would like to bring the young lady face to face with the pard whom she desired to meet.

So Kirk King went on out, and brought up at Vance Ullman's saloon, where he played draw with varying fortunes for several hours, all the time keeping his ears open for any intelligence he might be able to pick up.

Then, there was an arrival. Two or three rough-looking men came pushing through the doorway, and the foremost came straight behind his chair, placing his hand upon the shoulder of the Kid while he growled:

"Whar's ther boss, dog-gun ye? What hev ye done with Dave Brady?"

CHAPTER XX.

VANCE ULLMAN GETS HIS GUNS.

Kirk King was not taken by surprise, though he had given no sign of expecting trouble till it came.

He saw the men at the door as soon as they made their appearance, and noted that ther eyes were turned toward him. Just what they were going to do was more than he could guess, but he knew their presence meant trouble of some kind for him.

The grip on his shoulder was very solid, and many a man would have received a good shaking under the clutch of that nervous hand.

It did not move the Kid, however. He looked up lazily, and without either anger or astonishment in his tone.

"What's bitin' yer, pard; an' fur that matter, who ther thunder be ye, anyhow?"

"I'm Jack Rakestraw, boss ov ther Copper Bottom gang, an' I'm wantin' ter know whar Dave Brady are, an' what yer bin doin' to him?"

"Boss ov ther Copper Bottom, eh! Why in thunder ain't yer thar, then? 'Pears ter me, fur boss ov a vallyble property you might be puttin' in yer time ter better 'dvantage than rackettin' 'round ther Tiger, axin' fool questions."

"That hoss won't trot. I'm right whar I think I kin do Dave ther most good. Ther Copper Bottom hez bin jumped, an' you're ther man ez engineered ther job. We'll hev Jonny Seams an' his gang outen thar to-morrer mornin', jest too quick, but thar ain't that much time ter spare about lookin' fur Dave. He ain't up at his ranch, an' you bin seen snookin' 'round thar, an' we want ter know what yer done with him an' ther gal what war thar a-livin' with him. You want ter talk slow an' mighty straight er ther boyees'll set yer ter climbin' a tree an' go ter look fur him on the'r own hook."

An ominous growl at the speaker's shoulder told that the men who came with him thought the same way; and there were a half dozen other men gathered around whose faces were familiar. They had been among the loud ones when Manuel Perez fell to the stroke of the Kid.

The Kid from Kirby was willing to talk slow and straight, but what he said was not after lines Rakestraw intended to lay down for him.

"I'm takin' it on trust that you're Jack Rakestraw, ther man what Dave hired ter see ther Copper Bottom war guarded night an' day. You sold him out, mine an' body, an' now yer find yer can't d'liver ther goods. What Dave'll do with you when he gits back I d'unno, an' you wouldn't keer to, fur it'll be oncomfortable, sure. But Dave an' me war old pards in ther 'wayback, an' I'm holdin' his mine fur him, 'cordin' ter his orders. When I went in, ther wa'n't nobody thar, an' hadn't bin fur two days, aryhov. You throwed up ther job ter take sumbody else's money; an' now, yer want ter leave it

threwed up er thar will be cold meat fur breakfast. Sabbe?"

"Yer can't squirm 'round it that way," put in a ragged voice from the center of the crowd.

"We know Dave Brady, an' we know Jack fur his right-hand man; but who set you up fur a jedge in Israel? We ain't flyin' off ther trigger, ner tryin' ter raise no riot, but we're goin' ter put yer whar we kin hev yer; an' to-morrer, when it's daylight, an' everybody is jest ready ter give fa'r an' squar' jestice, an' nothin' else, you'll hev ther chance ter tell what yer did with ther bodies. Ter-night ye are goin' ter sleep in ther lock-up—ef ye kin sleep at all."

"City marshal, be ye?"

The Kid was cooler than ever as he asked the question.

"That's what. Name, Sid Dorlan; an' a terror ter evil-doers. Han's up now, an' no foolin'. We wants yer ter kim right erlong."

"Don't admire yer pluck. You let Rakestraw taste 'round fur quite a spell afore you could make up yer mind it was safe ter take a bite yerself. An' you're wide off ef yer count on takin' me ter ary lock-up, er callyboose. I've seen how that thing w'uks afore. The Lion are good ernough fur me, an' I count on sleepin' thar ter-night. You kin go 'long ef yer hez a mind to, an' to-morrer mornin' kin talk to me an' I'll be a lam' ez long ez I know it's a fair shake. But in ther dark, ter-night, not any. Take yer han's off, Jack."

King was meek as a lamb while uttering his ultimatum. He was not at all like the boisterous giant who had been ready to turn everything upside down. His request was so mildly spoken it was even a chance if Rakestraw heard it.

"You ain't shoutin' jest so loud ez you war, an' it shows yer good sense," exclaimed the ex-boss of the Copper Bottom.

"Kim right erlong, an' you kin arg'y them p'int's in the mornin'. Sid are marshal, an' we be his dep'ties. Git a move on afore we histe ye'r. Ye'r big ez a mount'in, but we got ther crowd."

Half a dozen men were holding drawn revolvers, and no doubt were ready for shooting, but Dorlan, Rakestraw, and some of the others who were closest, had never shown a weapon.

The Kid rather suspected there was a trap in the arrangement of affairs.

About the time he drew on the city marshal, no doubt some one would try to take advantage of the opportunity to shoot him down, and he did not care to take bigger chances than was necessary when the odds were so great against him.

But two or three more were taking courage from his inaction, and were stretching out their hands to aid Rakestraw. Unless he intended to surrender at discretion it was time the Kid from Kirby was doing something.

He had given his warning, and, he did not intend to repeat it.

Suddenly, one of his big hands shot out and caught Rakestraw at the belt which went around his waist.

Just one tremendous wrench and he had Rakestraw swung from his feet, and steady-ing a second with his other hand on his shoulder he cast him into the throng. It was done as he rose, so that he had the leverage of his legs to aid him, but the effort was a magnificent one, and created a confusion in the ranks of the enemy equal, almost, to the explosion of a bomb.

One or two pistols went off at random, but fortunately their muzzles were turned to the floor, as their holders kept them hidden at their sides until the right moment should come for production. The bullets did no damage.

On the contrary, the accidental shooting was rather an advantage to the Kid.

Those who only had the interest of curiosity in the game mostly wanted to put themselves out of close range, and they moved very quickly.

Then, the smoke, and the reports, and the screech of Jack Rakestraw as King let go of him, mixed things up momentarily, so that no one could see very clearly what was going on, and though a rush came immediately, it was a blind one, for it never took account of the fact that the Kid was no longer there.

The instant he had flung Jack into the crowd Kirk King gave an agile spring which carried him sideways toward the bar. Following it up by a few quick steps he planted himself in position, with the wall behind him, and a window convenient for retreat in case he should want to take a speedy departure.

There he stood, watching the crowd keenly, as yet not offering to produce his weapons, but his hands held low down, and it would take but a twist of the wrist and a turn of their muzzles to have his revolvers trained.

The movement had gained him a decided advantage, though he did not apparently care to crowd it for all it was worth.

Jack Rakestraw sprung up more angered than hurt, though the shaking down he had received was far from being a pleasant one.

"Hyer! Let me at him!" he shouted.

"Thar ain't a man livin' ez shall sling me 'round that way, an' I'll lay him out ef I swing fur it."

"Be you talkin' ez Jack Rakestraw, or ez a dep'tty marshal? Ef ett's ther fu'st you'll be apt ter git more ov ther same sort; an' ef ett's ther last ther gents kin see good reason why I don't want ter trust my preshus neck onder your fingers."

"Jack Rakestraw's a-talkin' now. Ther dep'tty marshal kin wait!" yelled Rakestraw, and though half a dozen hands were outstretched as if to restrain him, and several voices called to him, "He's too big fur ye, Jack!" he pitched straight forward for the Kirby infant.

It would have been a strange thing to Kirk King that the shooting had not already commenced had it not been for a side glance, which told the reason.

Vance Ullman was saying nothing, but he was watching the game with the eye of an eagle, and as he leaned lazily over the bar his hands pushed out two revolvers in front of him, so that the muzzles covered the crowd after a complete fashion.

Those muzzles were talking for him, and they said plainly:

"Go ahead with your amusement, but if you miss, or hit the wrong man, I'm waiting for you. Those random shots don't count, but just you get down to business."

The Kid waited for the attack without flinching, and as Jack came within distance his arm stretched out as though to push him back, or ward him off in an awkward fashion.

But it was neither a push nor a shove. By a quick movement from the elbow down, he delivered a rousing smack on the face of the assailing party, which sent him staggering back once more, almost as much bewildered as ever.

Before he could recover himself, the Kid from Kirby had filled both hands.

"This hyer thing hez gone 'bout fur ernough, an' ter git ter playin' earnist might give some good, honest man a lass' sickniss. You ain't a-keerin' 'bout Dave Brady, 'cause you sold him out. An' ye'r pitchin' inter me 'cause ye'r paid fur ther job ef ye kin send me up ther flume. Ye'r ther third man ez hez tried it in two days, an' ett's beginnin' ter make me tired."

"That's a lie outen ther 'hull cloth—" began Sid Dorlan.

From the first he had not seemed anxious to get too far forward. He had about as much courage as the average man, but he had a wholesome respect for Kirk King, and besides, was not certain that he was acting in the line of duty. So far he only had the say-so of Jake Rakestraw for his authority, and that was not every thing needed when it came to dealing with a man like this.

The charge against Jack did not strike him, as he was honest enough when he started in, though he was inclined to make a personal matter out of it now.

If he had not been interrupted, he would have said enough to make it such and perhaps a good deal more. But, before he could get any further, Rakestraw's pistol cracked.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE COLLAPSE OF A COURT.

JACK RAKESTRAW was a fairly good shot, but he was not a past-master with the

tools, and just now he was in no good condition for fine shooting.

He was in a terrible rage for one thing, and the smack he had received on his face made his eyes water until his sight was blurred. If he had been the least bit cool he would have waited until he could have made a sure thing of it.

Then, perhaps, he would not have fired at all.

At any rate, the Kid from Kirby remained to all appearance untouched, and as unmoved as ever. What he would have said or done was lost to the crowd through an echoing report, and the sight of Jack staggering back with his hand clapped to his head.

"Sorry, Jack," interposed the crisp voice of Vance Ullman.

"I haven't any great love for the galoot; but you know the rules. The mark of your lead in the wall is a full foot high, and that is something I won't stand. This thing has been going on long enough, anyhow. Such a lot of chin that leads to nothing I never did hear, and this sort of work kept up would break me up in a week. I missed my game last night because I was thinking too much of what the head-centers were doing, but I don't propose to do it again, so, if there are any more of you counting on doing wild shooting, you know what you'll get. And every time I'll bite a little deeper."

Vance had some friends mixed in with the crowd, and they were ready to stand by him, though it did seem he was crowding things.

In case like this he might have risked a suspension of the rules without much future danger to discipline.

Two or three of these men edged into the thick of the crowd, and though they professed the greatest sympathy with him they were waiting to checkmate any movement Rakestraw might make against the proprietor.

From the first it was seen the man was only barked, and no real damage had been done.

Sid Dorlan turned from the Kid to Ullman. He was a trifle cooler now, and was not anxious to have the battery of the saloon-keeper turned on him, though he thought it as well to know exactly what Ullman meant to do.

"You must make allowance, Vance. We b'in tryin' ter do ther thing up without wreckin' ther shebang, but we got ter hev him."

"Don't exactly see why. I wouldn't believe Jack on oath, and the stranger seems to have made out a pretty fair case; besides giving you as square an offer as you ought to want."

"But if he's killed Dave Brady, an' scooped in his mine, I don't reckon he's the sort of man to listen to; an' it looks ez though he had done both."

"Don't you worry about his killing Dave. There wasn't all this fuss over Brady when he was potted not long ago, and it looks to me as if there was reason for it now. I'd advise the square men 'round here to keep out of the mix. I know something about Dave, and I've heard something about the Kid, now that I've had a chance to think it up. They used to be old pards, and there's no reason why they shouldn't be yet."

"That's ther whitest kind ov talk, an' you do me proud, though ett's nothin' but ther truth," chimed in Kirk King.

"Ef Dave war 'round, ter look a'rter his 'fairs, I'd hev hed a holy circus hyer, an' you bet yer wouldn't hev hed no reason ter be crackin' at me. When I draw I file, every time. But, tell Dave gits back, I'm goin' jest ez slow ez I kin, an' you'll find me peaceable ez a mule. I've did what blame few men would 'a' done. I've stood an' took ther shootin' 'thout usin' my irons, hopin' ther crowd 'd lis'en ter reason, an' give me rights ter git even with ther galoots ez are tryin' ter run it."

"Ef ye'r sich a blamed nice man why didn't yer throw up yer han's when Jack called yer. A innercent man ain't got nothin' ter fear in Boot Jack."

This from some one in the crowd; but the speaker kept himself carefully out of sight.

"'Cause I warn't lettin' ther man ez wants me outen thar way git a lead-pipe cinch on me. I've seen innercent men hung in jest sich a whirl ez you war tryin' ter take

with me. An' I might ez well be dead ez crippled right now. Ef you men ez are howlin' loudest 'll make it a fair fight, and ther best man win, I'll take yer one at a time, er all tergether, an' you kin do yer dirty best. But ther way yer come at me I hed ter go slow tell I could convince ther white men ov ther camp it war a clean case ov crowdin'."

Ullman thought it was about time all this was brought to a focus. He did not like the looks of Jack Rakestraw, who was listening to the apparently disinterested advice of two or three men, with a face that was altogether too deadly cool.

He turned to Sid Dorlan, who, after all, was the responsible man of the outfit.

"Now, Sid, own up. Do you know that Dave is dead, or have you any proof of it at all? Isn't it only Jack's say so?"

"That's about ther size ov it, Vance."

"And has Jack ever looked over the ground himself, to see if there were any signs; or, did he take it from the say-so of some one else? I'm getting this down a little fine because I want to know where I stand, and I've made a mighty big guess at the real way the land lies."

Sid scratched his head, and looked a little foolish.

"I hedn't thought ov that, but I b'lieve ye'r' right. Jack ain't bin out to ther wicky-up, 'cause, now I think ov it, he didn't hev time sence I seen him afore."

"Well, my opinion is, the Kid has just as much judgment as pluck, and that all you fellows who were browsing around would have been paid for if he had taken it into his head to blaze away. If he wants to go peaceably with your crowd it's all right; but if you try to kick up any more of a bobbery here—I'm on his side for the present."

Vance laid down the law just as coldly as though he were calling the turn, and the cards were running in his favor.

"I b'lieve ye'r' right," said Dorlan, who had taken a calmer view of the subject.

"I'm keepin' an' eye on ther stranger tell I know more 'bout this thing, but I ain't makin' no funder move right now. So long."

Sid turned abruptly, and made his way through the crowd. When he got to the door he threw back a word of warning.

"I hope, boys, thar won't be no rackettin' 'round hyer. Ef ther are, an' Vance calls on me ter keep order I'll hev ter help him."

"And now, Jack, how is it with you?" asked Vance, coldly staring at the ex-boss at the Copper Bottom.

Before he answered Jack glared around at the faces of those about him.

He saw there were men there who would stay with him; but he saw too, there were as many who were willing to follow Vance Ullman's lead, and that the rest could not be worked up to any high pitch of enthusiasm, one way or the other.

"I'm holdin' ther edge. I kin see thar ain't ernough hyer ez keers fur jestice ter make it a object an' I'll do ez Sid done, an' lay low. When ther truth kims out I'll hev all ther backin' I want. I got ter recommender that ef I don't look after poor Dave's eenterests ther jumpers 'll git away with the Copper Bottom."

Then he took his departure, and three or four men went with him.

"They are after you," said Ullman in a low tone, addressing the Kid, who was watching the intermission with a smile on his rugged face.

"It just happened I knew a little about the game beforehand, and though it is not my custom to mix in these outside affairs further than to protect my property I gave you the full benefit of my rules."

"Thankee, pard. I'm tryin' mighty hard ter lay low an' run me own clam-wagen, but it 'pears ez though they didn't want ter let me."

"Oh, you are getting along all right. By the time they try a few more hitches at you, people will begin to see you are only on the defensive, and then you can afford to cut loose. But your nerve to-night will be worth a dozen corpses. They will be slower about piling in for the future; but if it does come again it will be in dead earnest."

The Kid understood the somewhat obscure caution, and returned his thanks briefly. It seemed a little odd to have Ullman on his side, for he would have thought it would be

the other way, but evidently the saloon-keeper held no malice over the result of the game in which he had got away with the bank. It might be, indeed, that he was saving up the stranger until the hour should come for his revenge, but if so he gave no hint.

There was considerable talk about Dave Brady and his disappearance, and the Kid, without dwelling on the mystery of it, told a pretty straight story in regard to that, and the occupancy of the mine. The weak point in his case was that he had no papers to show, and he steered clear of that part of the subject.

"Thar's jest one thing," he added.

"They talked 'bout takin' ther mine in the mornin', an' like ez not they war willin' ter do most anything ter keep me frum bein' thar when the circus kims off. Bless yer soul! Johnny 'll hold on tell ther cows' tails drap off. When they git down ter biz you'll see a heap ov fun thar, an' they won't jest be tryin' ter mount one lone stranger, either. I'm goin' ter turn in."

And all alone he swung away from the crowd, and went out into the night.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RAID OF THE ROUNDERS.

THE movement of the Kid seemed a bold one, but perhaps it was not as dangerous as it looked.

From what he had said, Sid Dorlan had dropped the case for the present; and as everybody knew how the land lay, Jack Rakestraw would think twice before trying a shot from behind, or, indeed, attempting to crowd King.

Still, there were some who shook their heads, and were more than half inclined to follow after, to see the fun which they thought likely to happen.

It was quite a little step from the saloon to the hotel, and the Kid knew from experience that danger might lurk by the way.

He knew the road better now than he did the first night of his arrival, and as the night was cloudless it was not likely he would again get off the track.

Before he had gone very far he heard a rapid footstep behind him.

There was nothing alarming about that, for the firm, quick tread did not suggest the assassin. He never turned his head until the individual was at his shoulder.

Then he heard a voice, which he recognized at once as belonging to the Sport from Denver.

"Howd'y pard! If you have no objections to company I wouldn't mind going along for a piece of the way. I have just been hearing about the racket at the Tiger, and mighty sorry am I not to have been there when the fun was on. If I am not a heapsight mistaken you and I are in this thing together, and I'd just admire to get first crack at them."

"I won't deny but what you've bin standin' by me, pard, jest ez well ez though I'd axed yer, but I reckon, unless yer sp'ilin' fur a fight, you hed better pass by on ther other side. It ain't likely that Manuel an' his gang'll come fur you tell they git good an' rid ov me; an' I think I kin keep 'em busy."

"Manuel—humb! He dances ez Doc Andrews fiddles, to say nothing of the beautiful head you put on him. He won't be able to squint through the hindsights for a month, and by that time the clean-up will be over, and somebody high-cockalorum."

"It'd be all right ef I war actooally playin' a lone hand; but I got a pard ter look arter, which ther f'ust letter ov his name are Dave Brady. Mebbe you won't care ter back his game, an' I'll swear I can't see whar yer profit are ter back mine."

"Perhaps I want to get a hack at the doctor. If I do you must know I couldn't hit on a better way. And as for Dave—he's all right. Pretty square man, and the more you know him the better you like him."

"Wal, ef you want to I can't hinder. Don't shoot my way an' I won't p'int yourn. That's ez good ez I kin say jist now."

"Good enough. Now, look out. I reckon they are coming now."

They were just passing a dilapidated old

shanty, which looked as if it was tenantless—and as the Sport from Denver gave the warnin' he made a quick side spring, which carried him well into the shadow. As far as the Kid was concerned it was a complete and almost mysterious disappearance.

He had no time to think about it, however. He heard the same soft footsteps at which Turner had taken alarm, and laughed to himself at the excess of caution which had defeated its own object.

It was that very softness which put both men on guard. Half a dozen men might have come within striking distance without attracting more than a passing glance; but men who approached so carefully had an object, and not a very worthy one either.

Kirk King might have taken to flight without much danger of being overtaken, or he could have followed the Sport from Denver into the concealment offered by the shadows, but he did neither. He simply strode on at the same gait, and waited to see what was coming.

Meantime he was thinking that the man who had lately insisted on being his pard had shown a wonderful discretion for one with his reputation. Had he retreated altogether, or was it a dodge to get in the rear of the enemy?

The steps came more softly than ever, and at last they were very near. The Kid was scarcely willing to believe the the evidence of his own senses.

"Now!" exclaimed a voice; and the men sprung at him.

A man like the Kid from Kirby, taken by surprise, and under such circumstances would be apt to turn around quick to see what the word was given for, and that was just the way the attacking party had figured it out.

Unfortunately for them, King was not surprised a bit. By the way they stole toward him he had made up his mind they intended to come to close quarters, and that suited him as well as anything.

He did wheel, but he gave a great spring forward first, that carried him well beyond the reach of the clubs which actually whistled as they fell. It was a narrow shave, but he balked the first rush by that one effort, and then started in on the offensive before they could fairly recover.

As near as he could see there were half a dozen or more in the gang, and he was in the midst of them like a flash, hitting out right and left so quickly that not a man of them had time to raise a bludgeon before his first blow fell.

The blows of the man from Kirby fell as though his fists were trip-hammers, and he bowled over a couple of the assailants, and evidently had made up his mind to get away with the rest in the same fashion. If his luck had stood to him he might have done it.

Unfortunately one of the fellows slipped in trying to get out of the way, and the Kid thought he had fallen.

On the contrary, he was wide awake, and darted to his feet again under King's guard, resting his face closely against the Kid's breast, while he wrapped his arms around him in a grip that a giant could scarcely have broken.

"I've got him, boys, pile on!" growled a voice, and the crowd was not slow to take the advice. Three of them, all stout, burly fellows, flung themselves on the hampered man, and with one prodigious effort pulled him to the ground.

"The bag, quick! Slug him for keeps while we hold him! If he gets the bulge on us once he'll do us all."

The fellow who had first clinched with the Kid retained his hold, and three stout men were adding their weight and strength to assist in keeping the prisoner down, while a fourth poised a sandbag of formidable dimensions, hesitating just an instant to make sure he knew exactly where lay the head he wanted to reach.

If the blow once fell even the hard head of Kirk King could not resist it.

It was actually coming—but so was something else.

Out of the darkness at one side dashed a shadow. The Sport from Denver had lain low long enough to allow them to develop their intentions, and then was ready to take a hand in himself.

As he came near he shot up in the air and lunged out with both feet.

The fellow with the sandbag went flying. If there was a rib on one side of his body which was not broken he did not, for the moment, know it, and he fell in a huddled heap with a smothered screech, while Charlie Turner, recovering his balance with a graceful effort, began to pay his attentions to the rest.

The surprisers were surprised, and had a rank bad time of it. The sport seemed to be a complete master of the savatte style of fighting, and in the present instance to prefer it to straight hitting.

His foot found the head of one of the men crouching on Kirk King, and the latter needed no more help to dispose of the rest.

The moment his right arm was loose his hand found the neck of the fellow who was so tightly hugging him, and as his fingers closed around it they seemed like talons of steel, fairly digging into it.

The man gave a shriek of pain, and his grasp relaxed. Then, the Kid sprung to his feet, dragging with him the third man, who had not as yet let go.

This man King, with his left hand, held at arm's length, and with his right planted a straight hit on the corner of the jaw.

If he had hit as hard as he knew how the result might have been fatal, but he tempered it according to his knowledge; and when the fellow dropped away from his opening fingers he knew he had simply given a knock-out blow.

"All right, up to the present time," laughed the Sport from Denver, surveying the battle-field. "I thought I'd make sure of who they were, and what they were after, before I mixed in. It's nothing but the Rounders, after all."

"Thankee, pard. They war doin' fa'rly well when you chipped, an' I reckon I owe ye another. Ther dead, hyer, kin 'tend to ther badly wounded, an' you an' me kin be moggin' along. Ther fun are over fur ter-night."

"I hope so. At first I thought it was a different gang altogether, and that they might be after me. I'll take that back for the present, though they may turn up after a while. If I'm not mistaken there is a new hand in the game, and he'll turn out to be the worst of all. Eyes open, Kid. I don't like to tackle Grant Thorne myself."

And as they went along Turner told something of his interview with the doctor, and what he had seen shortly thereafter.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ROPED AT THE RENDEZVOUS.

THE sport had eyes which were, if anything, a trifle sharper than those of the doctor, and he was using them all through that meeting at the edge of town.

He had just a glimpse of the face of a man peering from behind the rock which had sheltered him, but that glance was enough. He never forgot faces; and this face he had at one time been well acquainted with.

Fortunately, perhaps, his eyes did not meet those of Slyme, who was craning his neck to get a view of the doctor, so that his discovery was unnoticed.

Yet, long after, a quick look over his shoulder, just as he was dropping out of sight, enabled him to see the two men in conference. It might be a hold-up, but to him it looked more like a meeting of old friends.

It was not on account of this discovery he had proposed to the Kid from Kirby to stand by him. He was slow to shoot unless the time for it had really come, but no man was better able, or more willing, to fight his own battles.

He did not explain his reasons for the present, but told Kirk King of the new element which he thought was going to be introduced into the game. For, he had shadowed the doctor that afternoon, and knew a second meeting had taken place. He would have given a good deal to have overheard their conversation, but not having been able to do that he had made a guess at its subject which did not come a mile wide of the truth.

"So, you see," he finally remarked;

"there is a good chance for some elegant villainy to be afoot, and I don't know whether it is going to be for one of us first, or both together; but I'll wager high the young lady boarder at the Lion will come into it somewhere."

"What's she got ag'in' us?" asked the Kid, incredulously.

"Oh, nothing. It's the other way. We will have to be on her side. That infernal doctor is dead gone on her; and she don't care a continental for him. That will grind him so when he finds it out there will be no teliing what he won't try to do."

"Maybe ye'r dead gone on her yerself," remarked King, suspicion in his tone.

"Me? Not much. She's not my style, and is a couple years older, to boot. But she's a handsome woman, and very much in earnest about something or other that might be a runaway husband as well as anything else. Say, do you know anything about this Hugh Cathcart she's asking about?"

"Nothin', unless he war a pard ov mine what I told her about. An' I reckon he's dead; though she sez you bin tellin' her diff'rent. I war sure Hart Thorne went up ther flume at Alaska, but I didn't see it."

"Hart Thorne! That's something else. It was a thorn off a different rose bush altogether; and to show you how infernally uncertain all things are, he isn't dead, either. And I thought I ought to know because I shot him myself."

"What's this, then, 'bout Hart startin' South? Seems you loaded her up with some sich news."

"Not much I didn't. She was asking after Hugh Cathcart, which is a horse of a different color. He's the man who went South. I had an interest in him of my own, but if he wanted to go, confound him, I wouldn't have stopped him if I had the chance."

"But Dave seemed ter know. In course, it's hard ter keep ther run ov things out hyer, but Dave war down thar shortly after, an' he orter knowed."

"Dave be hanged! He ought to have known better. If you really want to find Thorne I could put you onto him a deal closer if I ain't wide off. But that's neither here nor there. What you going to do about Doc Andrews and the Copper Bottom? He is going for it if he can see his way clear. You ran a kink into his *riata* to-night, but he'll straighten that out and try a throw in the morning. He sees his mistake by this, I guess. He ought to have been on the ground himself. Those fellows are good enough men when you can get them to the scratch, but unless there is some one to drive them they don't seem to have any too much sand."

The sport rattled on without waiting for an answer to his various suggestions, but when he got out of breath the Kid spoke gravely:

"Ther trouble are, Dave hes lit out fur some reason er other, an' I dunno whar ter look fur him. I begins ter think it's more important ter find pard than it are ter bother about ther mine. Johnny Seams kin take keer ov that ez good ez a better man, an' ef they smoke him out, all Boot Jack 'll be apt ter know how they done it. I'm goin' fur pard in ther mornin'."

"Wonder you lost the time. I'd have thought you'd have struck out on the trail first thing."

"Thar warn't much trail ter speak about, an' thar didn't seem much ter lose by waitin', jest then. I put a keener on the scent, though, an' counted on his lettin' me know which way he went. It war runnin' a reesk, too. I better be seein' what he's about if he don't show up."

"Something tells me in my boots that I have an interest in it all. If you start in the morning I'll go along. If Johnny can't hold the Copper Bottom we'll run the thing right when we get back. What do you say, old man?"

"I ain't sayin' a blamed word," said the Kid, his voice suddenly fallen to a whisper.

"Go slow a minnit tell we git our bearin's. Thar's yer lady now."

They had been strolling leisurely along, talking in a low tone, and seeing to it that no one got within hearing distance.

Having almost reached the Lion they no longer looked for a renewal of the attack

which they had baffled, but they were just as anxious not to be overheard.

It was on account of this, and the fact that the Kid was always on the lookout, that they caught a glimpse of a female figure fitting from the front door of the hotel.

"Ain't kinder what I 'xpected, rackettin' 'round town this time er night. Wonder ef she knows whar she's goin'?"

"Wish I did," replied the Sport from Denver, impulsively.

"That's the disadvantage of not being a saint. It wouldn't do at all for me to go along. She'd better go alone and take her chances."

"That's about so, but it wouldn't hurt nothin' ef I war ter git an eye on her, an' keep et thar tell I found she warn't comin' ter harm. Ett's kinder more in my way than yourn, an' ef you'll go long in I'll see her safe, an' let yer know how it war when I kim in."

"Trot along, but if you let her get into trouble I'll take you over my knee, and break you all apart."

With this parting shot the Sport from Denver strolled on again, while the Kid from Kirby settled himself to the task of following the young lady of whom they had been talking.

Had Turner been along it would not have been long before he would have had his suspicions, but there had not been time to explain everything fully to the Kid from Kirby, and the latter followed without even a hint from the direction in which her footsteps turned.

She was going directly toward the spot where she held her interview with Turner.

It was by no means easy to follow at all close, for at any moment the young lady might turn around. The Kid had to be content with scouting in the direction, trusting to being able to close up at any time if his services seemed to be needed.

Finally, when she reached the rock behind which the doctor that morning had been hidden he could see she was joined by a man, and that the two at once engaged in a low and earnest conversation.

The murmur of their voices reached him, but he was unable to make out a word.

"Oh, wal, I reckon thar ain't no call fur me ter be in ther front row. I'll watch thet all goes square, an' they kin philander to ther hearts' d'sire. I ain't like young Turner. Et would 'a bin gaul an' wormwood ter him, now."

He threw himself down by the roadside, rested his head on his hands, and stared at the two.

It was too dark to make out who the man was, or if a stranger, even. Once, a little exclamation, pitched in a louder, higher key, fell on his ears, and the Kid raised himself a trifle, feeling somewhat uneasy.

"She's gittin' infurmashun by ther cart-load now, but blame me ef I wouldn't like ter know what sort ov truck he's loadin' her up with. Thar's plenty ov bad men ez might lay a scheme, an' ther bigger ther yarn they reel off ther higher it'd come. An' ef she showed wealth—laws help her! They'd ez soon slug a woman ez not."

The Kid from Kirby never dreamed he had been proceeding with less than his usual caution, or that he was in as much danger as the woman over whom he was watching. He had eyes only for what was in front of him, and so, left his rear unguarded.

He had hardly come to the unpleasant conclusion in regard to the safety of Miriam when—swish! came a noose, that settled over his head, and tightened on his neck before he had a chance to cast it off.

After that there was a confused struggle, in which his great strength seemed well-nigh able to accomplish the impossible. He sprung to his feet, only to be cast down again; and as he was fairly dragged along the trail a brace of ruffians leaped upon him, trampling, bruising, and knocking from his hand the revolver he had instinctively drawn.

It was all done in a moment. A shrill whistle called away the party in haste or Kirk King would never have opened his eyes again.

A man with a knife was bending over him, who hastily thrust once and then hurried away as a woman's scream rose on the night air.

Then, there was the rapid thud of horses' hoofs, and the Kid from Kirby was lying there alone, with his bleeding, pallid face upturned to the moonlight.

CHAPTER XXIV.

VISITORS FOR TOMASSO.

THE milk of human kindness was pretty thoroughly omitted in the construction of Tomasso, but when the Kid from Kirby had made him as comfortable as possible, and gone away and left him in possession of the cabin, he felt rather more friendly to him than he had thought was possible.

The Kid was not exactly lamb-like in his appearance, and when the Mexican had so signally failed in the attempted assassination he expected the worst of treatment.

Instead of that, Kid had bound up his wound and carried him gently to a resting-place where he could be as comfortable as was possible under the circumstances. He saw no reason to doubt that his friends would be notified according to promise, and he confidently looked forward to their coming.

But the time went woefully slow, and now and then the suspicion that the Kid might forget all about him, and go off on the trail of his friends, would obtrude.

He stood it reasonably well, however, and as it began to grow dark only thought the time of his solitude was nearly at an end.

It was; but things went slightly different from the way he had expected.

He heard the first faint sound of approaching footsteps which could possibly reach the cabin, and his eyes turned on the door with an eager, longing look.

They came nearer and nearer, and at last, as he was about to call out to quicken the steps, several men with masks on their faces, and drawn revolvers in their hands, bounded into the cabin.

It was too dark to obtain a view of the room, but the intruders seemed to feel that it was not a vacant one.

"Steady there, you Dave!" shouted the leader.

"Don't you try to put on frills or you will never have time to ask how they look. Hands out, and fingers empty! We mean old business."

While he spoke another man was lighting a match, and looking around in search of the lamp which was easily found.

With the light so quickly obtained there was no trouble in seeing Tomasso curled up on his couch, staring at them with wonder.

The leader swept around the room with the muzzle of his revolver, finally bringing it to bear on the Mexican.

"Who the thunder are you?" was the savagely asked question, as the man glanced down into the face of his prisoner.

"You are not Dave Brady. Where is he, and what in brimstone are you doing here?"

"I am only Tomasso, at your service. Where is the man Brady I know not. He and the child are gone."

"I see they are, but when did they go, and what started them? If I thought you had anything to do with their skipping I'd blow you cold."

"Something very nigh to that has already been done, senor. Some time this afternoon was it they left. It was before I came here, and it was of their own notion they took fright."

"If you are his friend he ought to have left word with you which way he went. Spit it out before I break your neck."

"No friend to Tomasso is he; but of the man who brought me here."

"And who was he?"

"Him they call the Kid from Kirby."

"The deuce you say. If you're a friend of the Kid's the best thing we can do is to lay you out, and let him see what he can look for when he falls foul of us."

"But, no friend was I to the man from Kirby. I would have shot him, but while I lingered to take sure aim some one else fired at me. Hard hit was I, but the man nursed me up, and brought me hither to wait for those I have called my friends. When he tells them they will come."

"You're frank, at any rate. What had he been doing to you?"

"He came nigh to killing Manuel Perez."

"And Manuel belongs to the gang at the Occidental—one of its fighting men. Guess you are all right. Now, you want to tell us all you know about where Brady went to, and you want to cut it mighty short and square. There is no time to lose, fooling here."

"Nothing can I tell you save that which I told to the man from Kirby."

"They left, carrying with them a bundle, and the man was weak so that they he tottered. They went along the trail to the west, and when I knew they were gone I cared nothing more. They were not my game."

"That's good enough, and you want to keep your hands off them. If anybody asks you the reason why you can tell him they belong to Captain Slyme, and he don't want any one interfering with his property. I'll look around to see if they left anything behind, and then leave you for your friends. You don't seem in a very bad way so of course they will be along shortly. If you were dying they wouldn't be here before to-morrow morning."

The overhauling of the cabin which followed was rapid but thorough, and no care was taken to conceal traces of the work. If Tomasso was blamed for having a share in it they did not seem to care.

Nothing of any great value was found, and the papers which were taken out of a rough chest were only glanced at and then thrown aside. In five minutes or less the whole gang trooped off without even a parting word to the wounded Mexican, who had curiously watched the whole performance.

"Captain Slyme—the road bandit," he muttered.

"And these be his men. The virgin be praised they were not after me. They will cut a throat with the worst so there be money in it."

In speculating what interest Slyme had in Dave Brady, Tomasso was almost able to forget his own trouble, and he was still thinking it over, and trying to draw a certain conclusion, when a half-dozen men arrived, who greeted him in an entirely different fashion from that of the outlaws.

The majority of the new-comers were friends and cronies of the Mexican; but several had been picked up, and who came along out of curiosity.

One of them, too, had been with Jack Rakestraw in the Copper Bottom; and he came to learn how the land lay. He did not venture into the cabin until he was sure from an outside investigation that Dave Brady was no longer there.

Tomasso sized up the crowd at a glance, and was cautious.

With his pards he had no objection to telling the whole line of fact but he had a modesty about mentioning the name of Captain Slyme to those who might misunderstand him. He had been suspected of being a road-agent himself, and thought the less said promiscuously of the guild the better it would be.

So, at first, he spoke generally about the disappearance of Brady, without intimating that he knew any particulars of his departure, and this was the report which was carried to Jack Rakestraw. If he had not already been planning for an opportunity to take a hack at the Kid from Kirby he might have followed the course he did in all honesty.

Tomasso's condition excited some sympathy, but no alarm.

The Kid from Kirby had done his work well and there was no call for a surgeon, or any other appliances. He was in much better plight than his friends had expected to find him, and it seemed useless to attempt to move him. Had not the Kid taken the pains to openly announce that he knew all about Tomasso's accident, and had left him at the cabin himself there might have been some danger that the Mexican would be connected with the disappearance of Dave Brady, but though his presence in the neighborhood might have a suspicious look the very fact of his remaining voluntarily on the ground would be a proof of conscious innocence.

A couple of his pards volunteered to re-

main with him over the night, while the rest went back to town.

It was only after the overflow had left that Tomasso told the whole story; and various were the conjectures as to what Captain Slyme wanted with Dave Brady.

Time wore on, however, and Tomasso dozed while the two watchers played cards on the table at the opposite side of the room. The game was not very lively, but it kept them awake. They were getting tired of it, and had agreed to quit after the next hand.

Before that was reached they heard a trampling outside, and on the instant were seized with a panic.

The new-comers were in front, so they made their retreat by the rear window, and paused. They knew something about the location of the cabin, and that in the darkness they could make good their retreat still further up the mountain-side.

Almost instantly they heard a sharp whistle from the other side of the house.

Of course, there was no answer.

After a brief silence a voice shouted:

"Ho, there, Reddy, is your work done?"

No Reddy answered, and the two heard some one bolting into the cabin, the click of his revolver sounding sharply as he went.

The watchers fell back. They did not believe harm would come to Tomasso, and the force here was too great for them to attempt to cope with it. But as they went they heard a voice which certainly sounded as though it had fallen from feminine lips. Was this another mystery, or only a part of the old one?

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TRAIL AT LAST.

It was a feminine voice the two watchers heard, and that voice belonged to Miriam.

Had they been close enough they might have seen she was a prisoner, though not a despairing one.

No great harshness was being used, and she sat her horse with a firm and fearless air. The way for her to make an effort at escape was open—but she knew in her own heart that effort would fail. Besides, some things had been told her which made her a less reluctant prisoner than one could have dreamed of her being, had they not known her side of the story.

The man who entered the cabin was Captain Slyme; and he glared around in it much the same way Reddy—his lieutenant—had done.

The place smelled of villainous tobacco, and he saw the table on which lay the scattered cards of the interrupted game. He also saw Tomasso, staring up at him like a wild beast. He had been suddenly awakened from a restless slumber which had been haunted by a dream none too pleasant, and for the moment imagined the lynchers had come.

Sharp and quick came the questions of Captain Slyme; and they were the same Reddy had asked but a few hours before.

They received the same answers in substance, though more briefly given; and without waiting to hear them to the end, the captain turned to the door.

"I am sorry to say you are playing in hard luck!" was his exclamation.

"The man was here twenty-four hours ago, just as I told you, but he must have got a pointer from some direction, for he's jumped the game."

"Not gone?" was Miriam's cry; and those were the words which the two men slinking up the hill had heard.

After that there was only a murmur, for the two lowered their voices.

"Yes, he seems to have pulled out, just as you said he had done. If you had only told us a little sooner, it might have saved us this wild goose chase; and I swear I don't admire taking such a ride for sheer fun. There was a chance for an ugly tumble. But I said I could put you face to face with the man you wanted to see; and by the great horn spcon I mean to do it."

"But this is not the man—this David Brady—though I would have given something to have heard what intelligence he could have given me. It was the third of the three partners for whom I was seeking."

Grant Thorne was the name by which he was known to the other two; and they claim he was killed at Alaska in some gambling-house brawl. Others have told me, however, that he went South, and has never been heard of since."

"Oh, I know all about the Alaska business—a million curses smother the man who downed me there! You have said something about it already, and it's no use to go over the ground again. I was the Thorne who was pinned up in that racket; and a mighty close call it was. But neither of us died there. And it wasn't Grant Thorne who went South, either, though it was the man you want, right enough. He went, but he doubled back, and this is the shanty where he hung up at last. Ten thousand is the figure we agreed on, and ten thousand it shall be. And I don't let you go out of my sight till I earn it and you pay it."

Had Doctor Andrews heard his man talking just then he would have thought Slyme had added a point or two to the game, for in very dead, savage earnest was he speaking.

This time Miriam was moved.

Her quest had seemed to make such little progress, she had been so baffled by contradictory information, she had begun to realize so clearly the difficulties in the way of her search that this announcement almost took her breath away.

"If I only could believe you!" she gasped.

"Surely, his own partner would know him better. And this—this must be an elderly man—older far than the man I seek."

"Don't be too sure of that. If you had ever seen him you would know he wasn't old enough to hurt, even if he has lost his colt-teeth. Just about the age of the man you are wanting, and so you would say if you had a glimpse of him at his best. Perhaps he looks a little ragged just now, but I don't see how you can know it."

"But I saw his daughter. Hugh Cathcart could never have a girl of her age."

"Might have a girl; but she mightn't be his daughter. I don't know anything about her, though chances are he has picked her up for a blind. You can have her in the bargain. Just wait a bit. It may be I can get you proof right here. Reddy has been rummaging around and seems to have brought things to light that may have a meaning."

He turned back into the cabin, and picked up some of the papers which had been cast aside.

He held them up, looked over them, and smiled grimly. If he was not mistaken he had found what he wanted. He was turning again to the door when he felt a nervous gripe on his arm.

Miriam had entered as silently as a ghost and was looking over his shoulder at the creased and crinkled letter he held in his fingers.

"Kind of hits you where you live?" chuckled Slyme, never wincing under that touch.

"I thought it would be a queer start if I couldn't find some proof around the ranch. Must have been in a mighty big hurry to leave such things run to waste after toting them around all these years. What sort of a burr under the saddle do you suppose it was started him off on such a dead run?"

Miriam was excited. That was to be seen with half a glance.

But she held her emotions so far in check that she was able to think lucidly after a moment's effort.

"It must be this. He knows I am on his trail at last, and fears to meet me."

"That may be all right, but how did he drop on to it? A fellow up here, with a bullet through his ribs—was there a bullet, though? By heavens! that may have all been a sell to account for his keeping quiet until you left this neck of woods."

"No. You are wrong there. Wounded he was, or, at least, so I believe. But there was more than one way in which he might have found out. I spoke to the Kid from Kirby in regard to his old time pards, and told him I was hunting for the one who bore the name of Hugh Cathcart. And I saw the girl who I supposed was his daughter. Either could have told him, and conscious guilt would allow him to lose no time in getting away."

"I should smile. And the guilt part might not bother him so badly, either. I'm open

to betting he wasn't as bad hurt as he let on; but Reddy will find out all about that."

"And who is Reddy? I have heard his name several times already. Can he be depended on? Does he understand?"

"You bet he understands. I sent him here to scoop in our man, and have him all ready for the interview."

"And who is this?"

She wheeled, and darted the tip of her finger toward Tomasso.

"He is a side issue. Somebody shot him—who it does not seem so clear and he was toted here as the nearest place where he could die in comfort. He don't seem a half bad sort of ruffian, and if he has told the truth, as I believe he has, the boys will have his trail down fine by the time we overhaul them. That is, if you are up to the journey."

"Oh, yes. I can follow if it takes a week. Should I lose him now who can tell when traces of him can again be found. He will change his name and his garb, and hide himself in some retreat where only chance can find him. Yes. I will go with you. With the money at stake I believe I can trust to your word."

"All right. We are off in a minute. The first move will be to a spot where I can have word from Reddy. If he has found the trail he will let me know there. But first, I must settle what to do with this—carrion."

"Better for thee to do nothing with Tomasso," said the Mexican, with a wolfish showing of his teeth.

"Nothing can he, or will he, do against thee if left alone; and if he be harmed what good will it do to thee. His friends marked thee down as they left, and they are up there watching. Find them if it can be done but if they hear that trouble is coming to me they are of the kind who would hereafter tell all they knew, and send a few shots down to help thee along."

The fingers of Captain Slyme lingered a moment longer on the butt of the revolver he had half-drawn. If look and action could be believed he had more than half a thought to send the Mexican along the road to the other world.

The cool answer helped more than he would have liked to have acknowledged to change his intentions.

"I reckon you can't say much that won't be guessed at, and you would only put them on the trail a few hours earlier if any one is anxious to follow it. I'd swear you in to keep silent altogether if I thought there was any depending on your oath."

"I wouldn't swear," simply remarked Tomasso.

"Well, I won't ask you to, but if you tell a word more or a word less than the truth as you have seen and heard it here I swear to hunt you down and send you over the range in great shape. Remember, the lady goes with me of her own free will and wish."

"It is nothing to Tomasso. He has his own concerns to look after. Take her and go. There is but one who has the right to question me, and to him I tell the truth. The man who owns the Occidental can tell whether I have lied."

"That's all right, and the sooner you let him know the facts of the case the better. He won't blow you up for keeping your mouth shut to the rest of the world."

The words of the Mexican were a revelation, but he did not care to show it too plainly, or lose more time.

He gave a careless nod, and followed by Miriam left the cabin.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CAMPAIGN FAIRLY OPEN.

THE window of the room occupied by the Sport from Denver commanded the approach to the Lion, and when Charlie Turner threw himself down he could look out and see who ever entered the house.

The light was none too good, but it was enough to enable him to distinguish man from woman, or tell the Kirby Kid from little Billy Johnson.

When he threw himself, all dressed as he was, on his bed, he had no intention of keeping a regular watch, but he looked out listlessly, thinking of the way matters had been running of late.

The sport was not a ladies' man at all, and up to this morning had not troubled himself about the feminine boarder, about whom he only knew in a hazy sort of way that she was looking for some one, who, so far as he knew, was not in his books.

If she had not spoken to him it is not likely he would ever have troubled his head about her; but since that interview he had found her face intruding on his thoughts more than he considered reasonable.

"Confound it!" he thought to himself; "she's not in my line and I don't see any reason why I should trouble my head about her. Unless, of course, I saw her drifting into trouble. If she cares for the doctor it is none of my funeral; and if she is going out to meet him at this hour of the night let him take care of her. It's dead sure he wouldn't want me to be trying it on. The Kid can attend to the job and I'll go sleepuns."

Nevertheless he did not go to sleep; and the longer he looked out of the window the less he felt like it. He began to wonder if anything had happened to the lady, or whether the Rounders had come back at Kirk King a second time.

"When a fellow feels this way he may as well do what he takes a notion to. A little walk will do me good; and perhaps the Kid needs me after all."

He got up, lit a cigar, and went out. He had no certain idea of which way he ought to go, but his steps naturally turned in the direction they had taken that morning.

That was the way he came to stumble over the Kid from Kirby; and at first sight he thought he had come upon a corpse.

"A pleasant condition for a poor orphan to find himself in," was his thought, as he threw away his cigar.

"Is he dead or only wounded? If I have to carry him back to town I'll begin to wish I was an elephant before I get through with the job."

But a cursory examination showed him King was far from being a dead man; and the chances were, no great damage had been done.

"It would have snuffed out some men like a candle in a gale—and I reckon a regular cyclone must have struck him—but the choking seems to have been the worst part of it. The fellow who used a knife was in too great a hurry to see how straight he had held. Just ripped along outside of the ribs, and let a little blood. No bones broken, and he's beginning to gasp already."

So he summed it all up, and without haste or flurry began to aid the Kid to recover consciousness.

A little later and the man from Kirby was sitting up, gazing around him in a dazed and helpless manner.

"You are coming around all right, old man. Get a brace on and tell me what has happened. Did any of them get away?"

"All ov 'em, pard; that's what's hurtin' me."

After such a lucid answer as that there was not much danger but what Kirk King would be able to talk along the schedule on prompt time before very long. He swallowed a strong dose of the medicine in the flask in his hip-pocket, which Turner extracted and held to his lips, and then wobbled to his feet shaking himself like a lately-risen horse and with the movement threw off much of the lassitude which had chained him.

"They roped me, pard, and they did it slick. It's a mighty big blessin' it warn't Manuel, er any ov his gang. They'd hev stopped ter see they finished ther job. These war on'y keerin' ter git me outen ther way tell they got cl'ar with ther game."

"And their game was the little woman who has been hanging out at the Lion, eh?"

"That's what. 'Peared kinder ez though she knew what she war a-doin', an' I wouldn't sw'ar she didn't set 'em at me. Whether they kerried her off, er whether she went willin' she's gone. I'd jest like ter know whar. Could tell then whether a man o'rter drop all other holds an' foller."

"Of course I can't tell you much about it, but I think I could make a mighty good guess."

"Guess erlong; ett's better ner nothin'."

"It stands to reason that if she is meeting a man out there this time of night he must

have convinced her it wasn't safe for him to be seen around Boot Jack by daylight.

"And I know of just such a man. He is as bad as they make them; and I saw him loafing around here this morning, holding a confab with Doc Andrews. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think they call him Captain Slyme, though when I knew him he sailed along as Grant Thorne. I told you something about him a bit ago, and that he was going to take a hand at the bellows."

"An' you thinks—what?"

"They have coaxed her off, or carried her off. Either way it amounts to about the same thing. Hugh Cathcart is the bait they are using, and what I'm wondering is, whether they've got him in a box, too."

The head of the Kid was buzzing still, and his limbs were in a nervous tremor. It was hard for him to bring his thoughts right down into working order.

"Cathcart! Yaas. Ef I only knowed which war who. I begins ter think ez I might 'a' bin mistaken. Ef so, Dave war playin' ett mighty fine; an' both trails run inter each other. Ov course I don't bear hard feelin's on 'count ov a bump on ther head, an' a scratch along ther ribs. Them are all in ther line ov business. But when it comes ter kerryin' off a female, then I'm drawin' a line. I tell yer, honor bright, I'm a-goin' fur 'em, pard."

He took a long stride as he spoke, and became once more fully himself.

"That's right enough, pard. Glad to hear you shouting. And if it's all the same to you I'll go along. Slyme will be after me, soon, anyhow, and I'd rather meet him a little more than half way."

He fell in by the side of the Kid, who scarcely noticed what had been said, but muttered to himself:

"Ef he means ter bring 'em tergether ther scheme are ter foller Dave. When I find him I'll git her. I'll try ther cabin fu'st. Mebby Crazy Coon hev brought in some news."

"That's all good enough," interposed the sport; "but it won't hurt anything to have a haversack along. It may be a little trouble to get it filled this time of night, but I can work it. If you don't want to wait run along, but let me know which way you are going and I'll catch up some time before morning."

"That's sense, an' yit, I would 'a' forgot it. Do yer know whar ther trail branches off fur ther Copper Bottom?"

"I've been out that far, but I might miss it in the dark."

"Yer can't, fur I'll be waitin' fur yer thar. Yer can't git past me ef yer don't wait too long. Kim right ahead. I want ter run over an' give Seams a hint how ter run things, an' I'll make it afore you git 'round."

Without further arrangement the two separated, the sport going to the Lion, while Kirk King made his way toward the mine.

"Ett won't do ter let Johnny git too deep inter a hole an' me not 'round ter back him up. In course, ez long ez he kin keep ther gang out, ett's all right; but he don't want ter be too bloodthirsty. I'll give him a hint thet wages 'll rise 'cordin' ter ther length ov time he hangs on, but thet ef they git too hot fur him I ain't goin' ter growl s'long ez he does his duty."

He had arranged matters this way in his own mind and was turning off to make a short cut and avoid passing near the Occidental when he became aware of the fact that in front of him was a band of men who were going in the same direction.

They went along very quietly, and marched with almost the precision of an army.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE KID JUMPS ON THE JUMPERS.

It took no second thought to enable the Kid to guess what it meant.

A gang was on the way to jump the Copper Bottom, and he rather smiled at the discovery. He had a sharp ear, and despite the regularity of the step he thought he could estimate the numbers of the force.

"They must think Johnny are mighty easy skeered, er they don't know who he's got behind him," he thought to himself.

"We kin give 'em a shakin' up ter-night that'll bluff 'em off fur a day er so, an' by

that time me an my pard 'll be back, an' takin' keer ov things. I'll flank 'em, an' git 'round in time ter wake Johnny."

The lay of the land was favorable for defense, and the Kid hastily mapped out something of a programme.

Fortunately, the route he proposed to take was considerably the smoother, though a little longer, and once he had dropped to one side there was little doubt about his going two yards to one made by the gang.

He stole along quietly enough until he thought he was at a safe distance, and then began to get over the ground at a rate which soon brought him to the mine.

No one challenged him, and no one was in sight. He leaned over the mouth of the shaft and called softly.

For the moment he almost believed that Johnny Seams had deserted him.

The call did not have to be repeated. Johnny Seams was there, and so were his men. They had taken up their quarters in the side chamber, and were sleeping, each with an eye open.

At a hasty order they came tumbling into the shaft, and began the ascent of the rope, hand over hand. They had not been expecting such a sudden call, but were ready for the emergency.

With a few hasty words King explained that an attack was threatened:

"I don't want no bloodshed ef I kin help it, not tell Dave gits back," he said; "but ef yer game ter stan' by me we kin send 'em ter town with a flea ov big size in the'r ears. What does yer say?"

"We've 'listed fur ther war, pard; an' we got ther right on our side. Ef ther' ain't more ov 'em than that, we're able fur 'em, an' not half try."

"That's what I like ter hear, an' we'll give 'em ther s'prise ov ther season."

"That's what, for they reckon in findin' no one 'round ter-night. I slipped in ter town a bit, an' I wouldn't wonder ef they thought I'd throwed up ther job," chuckled Johnny, who, by the way, had no particular love for Jack Rakestraw.

"Thar will be some hard raps, mebbe; but we won't be ther ones ez are gittin' them. I count on downin' a few ov 'em, jest in fun; an' then, when they git up ag'in, they'll be meek ez lam's."

With that the Kid led his men to the side of the trail, and after a few words of explanation as to his intentions all crouched down. It was as pretty a little ambush as the man from Kirby could have desired.

Before long the tramp of the approaching party became audible, though they were moving more cautiously than ever. The time for work was at hand.

Everything remained quiet until the enemy was fairly on the ground of the Copper Bottom claim, and then the ambuscaders flung themselves on them, striking as they came. And the Kid struck for a dozen.

There was no signal given which might have warned the men from town of the coming attack, yet the movement was almost simultaneous, for when Kirk King leaped forward the rest of the party sprang with him.

The Kid counted for three or four, so that the fact of his party being outnumbered by about that many did not make any difference.

Right and left he struck, and with each blow a man went down, while Jack Seams and his followers were about as successful. Four or five men were actually knocked out, and the rest were so confused and mixed up that they had no thoughts for resistance. It seemed to them the earth had opened out and disgorged a whole army of men.

"Some other ev'nin', p'rhaps, but not this ev'nin', gents," shouted the Kid as he forced Rakestraw's hands behind his back, and deftly bound them there to stay.

"Dave Brady owns ther Copper Bottom, an' he'll keep on ownin' it. We let yer down easy this time; but ef yer don't stay let we kin shoot, an' shoot ter kill. We got three men to yer one, hyer, an' more a-comin'."

The Kid thought this was a time to work a game of bluff; and he did it, too. Stunned by the surprise, and disheartened by the fall of their leader, the greater part of the men were ready for flight or surrender.

"Oh, let up on that!" shouted one of them.

"We have no business here, and we know it. We thought you were tired taking care of the Copper Bottom, and we'd help you out of the job. If you say so we'll take the back track. This one don't seem healthy."

Menaced by a drawn revolver the man said no more than he was thinking, and his surrender was voiced by several more who were still standing. It was just what the Kid wanted, a bloodless victory. Jack Rakestraw was there, and would not be likely to give in quite so easily if he had the choice, but Jack was a prisoner, and had no choice.

This was not a permanent defeat, but it disposed of the surprise, and there was not the least likelihood of the attack being renewed for the night. And if the doctor was interested in the by-play in regard to Miriam Cathcart it was strongly probable he would have enough business on his hands to prevent him mustering another army until it was too late. The Kid felt very happy.

"That's ther way ter talk it, an' ef ye kin on'y git Jack ter think ther same way he won't hev nothin' more ner a sore head to-morrer mornin'. I got him nipped jest now 'cause he's apt ter be brash, but I don't want him goin' inter town that way. Say you'll hold him stiddy an' I'll throw ther strings off, right now."

"We'll do the best we can," responded the self-constituted spokesman; "but maybe you had better leave them on till we get him a little out of temptation."

The suggestion was a thoughtful one, and exactly what the Kid would have liked to have proposed. With a few words the arrangement was completed.

It must not be supposed that the surrender was made without some grumbling; but the Kid had worked everything so well his men were now holding the drop, and there seemed no reason to doubt their earnestness. With Seams and his men ready to fire at the word there was nothing else to be done. The party marched off with the honors of war, save for the position of poor Jack, who was really too much dazed to do more than lift his feet in an automatic manner, and move on with the crowd.

A whispered word or two from the Kid arranged things with Seams. A couple of his men went with Kirk King, to see the paroled prisoners on the way to town; while Johnny and the rest remained at the mine. Not a shot had been fired, and so little noise had been made that the Sport from Denver when he came suddenly upon the cavalcade was more than surprised.

He drew out of the way, but not so suddenly that he was not seen by the Kid.

He was ready to allow the baffled jumpers to proceed on their way unattended; and none objected. The sport could hardly believe the trouble had come and gone in the brief time they had been separated.

King waited until the men were out of ear shot, and then called to his ally; who came out of the shadows.

They lost no time, but strode on and up the narrow trail toward the cabin. Tomasso seemed fated to be blessed with visitors that night. If rest and seclusion were what he wanted he had got into the wrong shop.

The Kid did not go through the formality of knocking. When he reached the little building, he went straight in, followed closely by the sport.

Tomasso's friends were snoring, but the noise awakened them, and they sprang to their feet. They imagined Captain Slyme and his men had returned, and were rather relieved when they saw the Kid from Kirby, confronting them with a grin on his face, but a revolver in his hand.

It was surely a stroke of inspiration which brought him there. These men could just load him down with information, nor were they slow about doing it. A few judicious questions started them, and they went over the whole story as already detailed.

"Just what I war afeared ov. A sorter kind er willin' pris'ner, goin' ter be fooled 'thout end ef we don't git a chance ter chip. But Dave—land sakes! What sorter a mix are this? Do they want ter find him? Ef they do they may diskiver what it are ter fool 'round a healthy old cyclone. I'm mild ez milk to a woman; but I can't go back on my pard. Who are she, an' what does she want?"

"Hard telling considering she's a woman."

—and don't you forget that last fact. I don't go much on the sex at large, but I've had several relatives of the sex, and they want to be handled carefully."

"Talk to yer gran'father. I'm savin' ov both. Ef we hed bin a leetle sooner we'd 'a' had a better chance, but they can't go fast, an' ef we put on steam we may git on ther hind end afore mornin'. An' ef we don't it ain't countin' much. I kin guess whar they will hold up at; an' Crazy Coon are ter hear frum yit."

From what the Mexicans said the outlaws had little more than an hour the start of them; and they could not move for the most part out of a walk. The two threw themselves without hesitation into the pursuit, encouraged by the thought there was but the one route which the outlaws could have taken if they went far in the direction assumed on leaving the cabin.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A LEAF FROM THE PAST.

KIRK KING knew something of the route which led away beyond the cabin, for it was from that direction he had been journeying when by accident he stumbled upon his old-time pard.

He had reasoned it out that unless Dave was a great deal sounder man than he gave him credit for he would hardly seek to reach the nearest settlement in that quarter of the compass without a halt. It was a long journey for a sound man; but for one who had lately been wounded sorely, and with a girl for a companion, it was more than a wise head, like that on Brady's shoulders, would decide to undertake.

But, if he really was a fugitive, he would not halt unless in some hiding-place, where he would have facilities for both defense and retreat.

Just such a country was open to him, and though King only knew it from a distance, he had made no mistake when he located the spot his pard would strike for. Dave was there; and Little Mischief was with him.

Dave was a trifle paler for the jaunt of the previous afternoon, but he looked better than three or four dying men; and Lill was fresh as a mountain pink, as the two sat by the side of a carefully extinguished camp-fire shortly after sunrise the following morning.

Brady did not anticipate immediate pursuit, for he did not know Tomasso had been lurking in the neighborhood when he started out on his retreat. Had he fancied the tale the Mexican would tell—and to whom—he might have taken more care to obliterate his trail, and would have hesitated to leave traces which might tell of his presence.

"I'm sorry to have had to bring you on such trip as this bids fair to be," said Dave, reflectively, as he glanced over at the fair young face.

"It is hard lines for you, and no mistake; but I saw nothing else for you to do but come along. I could not leave you in the cabin by yourself."

"No, no, Dave! Anything but that. I would have died. And do you suppose I would have let you come alone? Never. Why, I wasn't sure you would not die on my hands the first mile. You leaned on me part of the way, you know you did."

"I hope I was not very heavy," answered Dave, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I had to keep up appearances as well as I could. Of course, I was reasonably sure no one was watching; but if there had been he hardly would have believed I could get very far. And it was no joke of a march we made, either."

"No. And now that we are here what are you going to do about it?"

"Stay here, I guess, till we are starved out, or driven out. I don't want to give up Boot Jack and the mine unless I have to, and perhaps in a couple weeks it will be safe to venture back. By that time we will have had picnic enough and to spare."

"But suppose it is not safe?"

Lill was persistent, and her curiosity not easily satisfied.

"King will take care of things till we get back, and we'll stay away a while longer. But I can't keep you here forever, or drag you around from post to pillar. If the mine

has proved a failure I'll take some of this coin I will have no use for, and send you where you will be better looked after, until I can give you something like a home ought to be."

"And suppose I will not let you go? Do you think I am going to leave you as long as you need me? And you do need me—honor bright, don't you, now?"

"Honor bright, I am afraid I do. You have saved me from despair, to say nothing of having turned me back at the last moment from an expedition of which there seems to be no survivors. But we can't have everything we want in this world, nor all we need, and for your own good I must give you up for a season. And when I do that I will provide so that if the worst comes to the worst with me you will have at least a living chance."

There was no mischief in the glance of the girl as she looked over at her *vis-a-vis*. She seemed near to tears, and there was a decided tremor in her voice as she spoke:

"Come, dad, you know better than that. When you go up I'm not sure I care to have a living chance. And until you do I am bound to be with you, to take care of you. I'm not going to forget you gave me my life back again when it was gone, and have been making it over again, day after day. I make you laugh sometimes when I feel like crying myself, and I have more in my brain than mischief. If I could make you happy I would do it if it took my life. There, now, you know the whole truth, and I'll never speak it again."

She tried to close with a laugh at her little joke, but the laugh was not much of a success. There was too much of a sob in it.

"I believe you, my girl, and I won't part from you sooner than I can help it, but I am afraid the hour will not be long deferred. I have done the best I could for you; now that I can do better I must perform my duty. I have the money to do it, in a modest sort of way, and if the present cloud blows over, and the mine should prove what I think it, I will see you have your share in the good things money will buy."

"But that cloud—what is it? Why have you bolted? What are you afraid of? You can trust me; and if you couldn't no one was ever hurt by telling the truth about himself. And I want to hear your side of the story because I will always believe it. Don't make yourself any better or worse than you are. Remember, you will always be good to me."

"You have been guessing more shrewdly than I supposed; and yet, I might have known. But it seems so pitiful to be saying to a child, 'I am innocent,' when, perhaps, in a few short weeks all the world will be saying, 'the wretch was guilty,' and as many of them as can be tugging willingly at the end of the rope."

"It is not that bad?" exclaimed Lill, trouble in her face. "That means something more dreadful than I could stand."

"Yes; that some day they may hang me—if private vengeance does not claim me sooner. If they once get me in the net it will be a net indeed. Things are not what they seem; but all the seeming is against me."

"Well, the cards do seem to be running against you, and I guess you are getting near the end of the deal. Would you sooner I would hear what they have to say without being able to tell them what it ought to be? Perhaps, some day, even I might not believe in you."

"You are right. It is a tangled skein, and I won't try to unravel the whole of it, but I'll reel off a few threads as straight as a string can be reeled, and from them you can judge of the rest."

"It is something which happened before you met me, of course," said the girl encouragingly, as she watched Dave sink down until his clasped hands supported the back of his head.

"Yes, long enough; and if it had not been for it, I would probably never have met you."

"Then it was lucky for me, so you have one thing to make you feel encouraged. For, if you had not met me, you know I would have died. The good made a beginning of coming out of evil, and I wouldn't wonder if it would all straighten up in the end."

"Perhaps; and that is what makes me think you must have a future before you. But what I was going to tell you will not take many words."

"When I came to the West I did as a good many others before me, I changed my name. I was under a cloud, not through any fault of my own as I could see it, and I did not care to have the old name rising in judgment against me."

"In course of time I fell in with a young man, scarcely more than a boy, and we joined our fortunes because we were attracted to each other. I would have died before I would have harmed him, but my miserable luck seemed to be against us both, and I determined to go away and leave him."

"I went, leaving a note for him, explaining why I went, and making him a free gift of my share in our claim, if it should ever prove worth the giving."

"That note was never found, and that very night the boy was murdered in our cabin. I did not know this till long after, and even then it was not at once that I found I was believed to have done the deed for the sake of a few thousands which he had won at cards before he returned to our shanty."

"Well, nothing I could do could help the matter, which was almost forgotten. If I had attempted to hunt up the real murderer, I would only have got myself in the tangle, and so simply drifted a little further from the spot, and kept on with my hand to mouth luck. Once or twice I thought I had struck it rich; but the lead always petered out, or something happened."

"But if that matter was altogether forgotten, and no one ever gave you any trouble about it, what is the use to worry now? By this time, like enough, they have hung the guilty man, and you have just been borrowing trouble in heaps."

"Sometimes I used to think it might be that way; but I knew better all the time. And now there is a woman on the trail who will never know rest till she has hunted me down. I was the Hugh Cathcart she asked after. When you told me of that interview on the road-trail I knew it was time to leave, even if I could not hope in the end to escape her."

"Why under the sun didn't you stay and tell her just what you have told me? She looked square as a die, and willing to listen to reason. That might have settled the whole thing. But what a confounded fraud she must be!"

Lill broke off suddenly, and there was an angry little ring in her voice. She remembered now that she had her suspicions at the time, though how it came she could not then have told.

"No. She would not believe me," said Dave sorrowfully.

"I sometimes wish I could die by some one else's hand, just to have it made sure once for all that I am not to die by hers."

"Fiddlestick! You are not going to die at all—at least till your time comes. And that is going to be a good many years from now. You are not a coward, and you can't make me believe you are."

"No, not a coward, for a coward would be afraid to die. I only object to being murdered by the one person who is bent on doing it. I am not coward enough to beg, and for proof of innocence—I have none. I feel it in my bones that the warning I had is no idle threat. When we meet there will be a pause for explanation; and when I can give none worthy of the name I must die."

"Well, fight, then. I know what you have done; do it again."

"I cannot. My hands are tied."

"Then I will fight for you. You gave me my life when I had lost it altogether, I will save yours in spite of you."

She jumped up with her eyes flaming, and her hand on the butt of the revolver she carried. Knowing her as Dave did he was aware this was no empty boast. Little Mischief could be very like a kitten in her play, but in matters of the life and death of her and hers she could be as savage as the full-grown tigress.

"No! For Heaven's sake, no!" he exclaimed, half rising, and holding out one warning hand.

"That would be the worst of all. If it is so cruel that I should die by her hand, what

think you it would be if she should die by mine? Let her and her tools work their will when I can no longer avoid them. So I can save you from the wreck I shall ask nothing more. I will flee, but I will not fight."

"Ah, ha! You care for her, then! You think more of her than you do of yourself and me!" cried Lill, clapping her hands together, with what she intended should be a laugh, though there was a fierce glitter in her eyes.

"You are as big a madman as the worst of them, and I will have to be your keeper. When she comes it will not be alone, and I will attend to the rest of them, if you won't. Then, you and she for it till I see you can't take care of yourself. And, if I am not mistaken, there they are now. You didn't leave the cabin a minute too soon."

She pointed straight at the narrow vista which the spot commanded.

Dave had chosen his camping-ground well since right here he would be able to catch a glimpse of those who should follow his trail, and without much danger of being seen himself. It was fully a mile down to where a little party was picking its way carefully along. One by one, a dozen figures passed across his range of vision, and one of them belonged to a woman.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DAVE BRADY SEES A SNAG.

DAVE BRADY watched the procession with breathless eagerness, never aware that Lill was watching him in turn with an interest every whit as great.

It was true her glance went from him to the party in the distance and back again, with the rapidity of a flash, counting out each several member as it moved across the plane of her vision; but it was Brady she was studying. She marked the little shiver which went through his frame and knew that it was the sight of the woman which caused it.

Her sight was as keen as the keenest but at that distance faces could not be read or recognized, and it was only by guess she knew it was the individual who had undertaken to catechize the Kid from Kirby. It was not fear which forced that shiver through the frame of the strange man at her side; and though Little Mischief did not understand it, she had a double reason to hate the woman who was so obstinately trailing down her only friend, her more than father.

It was almost a certainty the two fugitives had not been seen.

The men were looking downward rather than up, and had one of them chanced on a glimpse of the lurkers an exclamation, or a word would have caused a halt and others would have tried to share his discovery.

"I knew it would be so. When she got that near, her own soul would tell her who the hermit was who lived just beyond. Or, a chance word from the Kid might have opened her eyes. How she came to think Thorne was the man for whom she was searching I cannot guess, but she has given up that trail now and is after me."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

"Run, Little Mischief; run like blazes! We'll play hide-an'-coop with them till the cows' tails drop off, and it's two to one they don't catch us. I know a thing or two about this country, and unless they get us surrounded there is always a back door where one can slide out at when they get too hot in front. Oh, I've not given the game up yet if I am badly scared."

Brady had braced himself after the shock. He did not intend to let his companion lose heart, and it was necessary for both of them to keep up their courage if he wanted to pilot the girl safely out of this labyrinth, and have time to make the arrangements he was counting on, for her future welfare.

"That's more like your old self, dad. And when we get tired of runnin' and they come too close for comfort, if you don't want to I'll fight. There's only a dozen of them. But if you know of a better place we had better get there. We can move now without being seen, and the longer we we can keep them from getting a sight in the game the better."

"Right, my child," answered Dave, with a last keen glance around the spot.

"If we had missed them, and they had seen us, it might not have been healthy to have lingered, for they could have got us into something like a box; but the way things are there is time enough to make a sure thing of it; and if we go at once we can hide our tracks altogether, besides leaving them where they won't be apt to get in our wake for another twenty-four hours."

He gathered up the traps with which he had been loaded, Lill picked up hers, and the two went on up the mountain-side.

It would have been a disagreeable sort of surprise could some one have told them the truth as it was. Captain Slyme generally slept with one eye open, and when on the trail it had to be a very slight thing which could escape his attention.

He alone of the party caught a glimpse of the two watchers.

Had it been any one else a little cry would have come to his lips, even if he had not halted for a better view.

But Slyme was always willing to trust his eyesight, and he needed no second look to tell him what was to be seen. Up, through the marvelously clear atmosphere he had been looking, and though they made but little more than two points on the mountain-side he was sure he had seen the recumbent figures of a man and a girl.

It was the one spot where such a view of the upper mountain could be had, and he had been ready for it; to linger would have been for no good purpose. He knew where they were now, and if they turned away there would be no seeing in which direction they were going.

What he wanted was to prevent their suspecting they had been seen; and in that he was successful.

When they had gone on for perhaps a score of yards, and were hidden from above by the straight walls of a narrow defile, the captain held up his hand, and at the signal the cavalcade halted.

"Knowledge beats luck every time! but when you got 'em both there's nothing else in the game!" laughed Slyme as he turned to Miriam.

"You have reasonably keen eyes, but I'll wager big money you didn't see what I did, and it was the sight you are dying for."

"What was it?" exclaimed Miriam, who guessed, yet hardly believed.

"Dave Brady, of course. And the best of it is, we've got him. He will never suspect we saw him, until it is too late. Then we can take him in style, and you can hang him at your leisure."

"Hang him?"

Miriam shrunk before the harsh word, repeating it over with an accent of terror.

"That's what it amounts to. Unless you have been doing a heap sight of bluff and bathos you mean to kill him, and that's the right way to settle it, unless you mean shoot on sight."

"Perhaps you are right. I certainly meant that justice should be done when I found him, and if there is no other chance for it I vowed I would undertake the work myself. Having got this far on the way, I certainly will follow it to the bitter end. Yes. It was best for you to use the proper word. It brings me face to face with the duty I have sworn to perform. If there is no law that will avenge the double wrong my hand is ready for the work."

"Then you mean it? That is what I wanted to know; because if you didn't, the hope of corralling a certain generous little sum you promised us would have begun to grow hazy. There won't be any going back now, because we are going to keep you up to the collar, and if you happen to grow weak, we'll finish the job ourselves. You understand we are not running this thing for fun."

"I understand, but what matter so long as I gain my ends? I have made you a promise, and that promise shall be kept if you keep faith with me. If nothing comes of it all the fault will not be mine."

"And you bet it won't be ours," smiled the captain.

"I'm only getting you ready for what is to come. We haven't got him yet, and it will be some hours before we do. Unless he makes up his mind to surrender gracefully

we won't be apt to have much of a chance before sundown. From what I know of him he shoots straight, and without much coaxing, and as we don't intend to lose more men than we have to, I would prefer a surround, and a capture by strategy in the first place, with slow starvation to fall back on if that fails."

Taken altogether the conversation seemed to be satisfactory to the captain, for he gave the order to advance cautiously, but as rapidly as it was possible for him to lead the way. Their coming could not, of course, be long hidden, but after a certain point had been reached, to the mind of Slyme it made little difference whether it was discovered or not. He could reach the spot he was aiming for before Dave could pass it, and that was all he asked for the present.

For some time the silent march continued, winding along through the bed of a crooked gorge, and gradually trending upward. At length, just when Miriam gave a sigh of relief at the thought they were about to leave the sunken path and try one which was less monotonously lonesome another halt was called, and at a gesture the men sprang from their horses, while Slyme, approaching, held out his hands to help her down.

"We've reached a spot where, if we are not too late to bag our game, I can give you a sight for your money. We couldn't go any further with the horses, and I am going to send them back a ways. I'll have things all arranged in a minute."

He gave a few hasty orders, which resulted in part of the men taking the animals and starting back on the trail, while the rest got ready for the work here.

After that, the captain took Miriam and led her up the natural road which led out of the gorge. It was steep, but practicable for an active scrambler. When they had reached the bank's upper edge they crouched low while Slyme directed Miriam's gaze. There was but one course along which Dave could come; and if he had moved promptly after being seen by the outlaw he ought soon to be in sight.

"You want to lie mighty low," said the outlaw, as he pointed from the lurking place where Miriam could see with little chance of being seen.

"I want to make right down sure we are onto your man or I wouldn't risk those keen eyes of his. After that we must slide back, and wait for him to walk into the trap."

"And if he sees?"

"Then, it will be too late for him to go back. By that time the boys I sent with the horses will swing in on him from behind. He will be in a coop, and we can gobble him up at our leisure. If he tries to break out we catch him, if he stays in he starves, to say nothing of the want of water. If he was alone he might stay rusty till the last, but with a girl in tow he will have to throw up his hands sooner or later."

The mention of the girl did not soften the tense lines in Miriam's face. She seemed to be part of Dave Brady's sin, and her brow grew darker as she gazed.

An hour, perhaps had passed while the waiting couple crouched in the ambush.

Then, their patience was rewarded. In the distance two figures could be seen, loitering along. One or the other appeared to be weak, for their progress was slow, and if attitude went for anything, it was somewhat painful.

The view was not a close one, but to Miriam's staring eyes the man for whom she had been hunting seemed very near.

Perhaps imagination aided her more than she knew, for she could trace the hard lines which care and his late injury had marked on his face, and under them all see the countenance of the man she had sworn to hunt down.

"It is he. It is Hugh Cathcart," she gasped, unable to tear her eyes away from that face.

"He is years older than I could have dreamed, but I could swear to him in any light and at any distance."

"Good enough, then. We know we're not sending a boy to mill. Creep back, and be careful how you do it. If he catches a glimpse it will make a heap of trouble."

"What! A dozen of you to one man. Go forward and call on him to surrender. He

will never be a fool, even if he was a murderer."

"Of course he won't, but he wouldn't act after the lines you lay down for him, either. One man! Great Scott! One man with a revolver up there would be good for two or three, anyhow, on the theory of chances; and as I always have to keep in the front rank I would be more than apt to be one of the elect. Not any of it in mine, thank you, while there is a better way. I can pick him off for you with a Winchester, but that you say you won't have. Get down, and don't waste an infernal other minute talking about it."

The outlaw's tone was stern, and there was an angry glow in his eye as he turned on Miriam. She saw he intended to be obeyed, and as there was nothing to be gained by a conflict just then, she slipped away as cautiously as she knew how.

The chief lingered, for a reason of his own, and she heard a bitter curse from his lips as she dropped to the little path below the ledge. Cautiously as they had moved they had been seen.

The two loiterers halted suddenly, Lill with one hand holding Dave Brady's wrist, while with the other she pointed at the spot where for an instant the figure of the outlaw was visible.

"By the heavens!" exclaimed Slyme.

"That cake's all dough, and we'll have to set another batch for baking. We hold both ends against the middle, but it's going to take time now for the game to come our way."

As he spoke he dropped at full length and brought around the Winchester from his shoulder.

Like magic the two above disappeared. They had dropped behind a huge boulder, but from behind it was thrust the barrel of the rifle which Dave Brady carried, and its muzzle promptly covered the spot where Slyme was lying. A touch of the trigger and the captain would be booked for over the range.

CHAPTER XXX.

AN INSURRECTION IN THE RANKS.

So thought Slyme, at least, and without waiting to develop more thoroughly the intentions of Dave Brady he wriggled himself backward, and came tumbling down the bank to the side of Miriam.

"Oh, he has seen us; and what it worse, he knows we have seen him. That settles the business for the present. There isn't an atom of hurry now, unless he gets it into his head to hunt us. Then, he may make it lively for a season. I'll wait a bit to see if that fool notion does strike him. If it don't I'll look after business a little. There will be plenty of time, and you can run the gang till I get back."

"Thanks for the offered honor," responded Miriam, coldly.

"I firmly decline, however. I know nothing of your gang, save as a party of men who have come out to help me hunt down a criminal. Let them do their work without any running. My dealing is with you alone."

"Nevertheless, as they are a somewhat uncertain lot, I will leave you a six-shooter, and certain advice. If things don't go altogether to your liking don't linger too long on your aim, but shoot to kill. I have had to exterminate two or three sets before I could gather one which was at all safe to live with. I wouldn't wonder if you had to do the same."

The captain was more in earnest than Miriam thought. He handed her the revolver, and made a few earnest remarks to his men, as to what he expected them to do. Having done this he took his departure, striding down the gulch at a great rate. Before Miriam Cathcart well knew what were his intentions she was alone with the tigers.

The captain was not altogether easy in his mind, but he shrugged his shoulders as he went along.

"It looks like a risk," he thought; "but it can't be helped. I've got to straighten out the tangle with the dear doctor, and as this is not exactly the lines we laid out he will never find me unless I hunt him up. I've

got 'em both corralled, and now I want to make sure there will be no hitches in the rest of the programme."

In the course of half an hour he came across the horses, guarded by one of the men; and mounting his own steed he set off again at a pace which would carry him out of the rugged defiles before very long. He was no saver of horseflesh, and was willing to risk his own neck; no wonder he could make speed.

Still, Miriam did not refuse the weapon tendered her, though she had one of her own well hidden away. This would do for present use, and the other might remain unsuspected for an emergency. When Slyme had placed himself and men at her service for a certain price she had become reconciled, or almost so, to being his prisoner; but she began to see that it had its dangers as well as its disadvantages.

Had she been alone she would have gone straight to Dave Brady, and charged him with the worst. When she tried to do that, however, she was warned back with no uncertain earnestness, and she found herself compelled to obey.

She stared at the man who stood in her way, but made no answer. When he had finished his order she went a little further up the canyon, and seated herself wearily on the ground.

This waiting was tiresome work, though she had been waiting so long. Here was the object of her quest close at hand, yet they seemed as far apart as ever. She closed her eyes to think it over, and that gave the overmastering weariness a chance to take hold of her. Before she realized whither she was drifting she was asleep.

She must have slept a long time, for when she awoke the direct rays of the sun were no longer pelting down into the canyon; it seemed cooler and darker. The needed rest had strengthened her, but she began to feel the demands of appetite.

She had been glad enough to get away from the rough-looking men who trained under the captain's orders, but that was when she did not need them. Now, she put her pride in her pocket and turned back to where she had left them.

The very fact that they had allowed her to stroll away up the canyon uncautioned, and apparently unwatched had convinced her there was no practicable outlet in that direction, but she felt sure she could not go far in the other without coming across at least a guard, and she was not disappointed.

The men were there, but they were talking about something more important than a meal.

Their heads were together as though they belonged to a circle of plotters, and something told her she was the subject of their conference. As she approached they faced her; and it was not with pleasant looks, either.

At that she thought of the revolver which Captain Slyme had given her, and remembered she had left it where she had taken her rest.

It was very careless, and she wished she had it now; but she did not allow the regret to appear in her face, nor did she give the least sign of confusion or alarm.

"What is it?" she asked briefly, as she saw by the way they looked at one another that something was to be said.

"Beggin' yer pardon, miss," said the man who stood nearest to her.

"We don't want ter make it rough lines fur you ef we kin help it, but we bin a-talkin' it over, an' it strikes us the boss ain't gittin' ready ter do ther square thing by us, ez does all ov ther work, an' runs ther most ov ther reesk. We don't know jest what sorter a bargain he made with you, but we're mighty sure there is a heap ov money in it, an' we've 'bout concluded that we'll git that coin, an' leave him out in ther col'. He's a-wearin' sorter a man, anyhow; an' you look ez though you might mean what you said."

"I certainly mean all that I said," was her firm answer; "but I must be treated as I bargained for. I recognize no one save your captain in the deal, and you meddle with me at your peril."

"Ten thousand is a heap ov money, an' you kin save jest half ov that by dealin' with us, pervided you play squar' from A to ampersand. We got ther inside track, an'

we jest mean ter bluff ther captain off, an' set up fur ourselves. Ez fur that cove up thar ez we're s'posed ter watch, you don't want him ez bad ez yer thought yer did, an' we don't want him at all. We'll move out this afore Slyme gits back, an' it won't be healthy fur him ef he finds it's us ag'in."

Miriam's hand went swiftly to her bosom in search of her weapon, but there was no quiver in her voice as she answered:

"I refuse to have anything to do with you save through your captain, and I do not move from here until he comes. I have told you that much once before, and I do not intend to repeat it again. Come near me at your peril."

"Thar's whar you made yer big mistake, ladybird. It's a daisy bluff, but it won't win. Stiddy, boys! I'll handle ther wild-cat."

He sprang at her like the animal he had named. She had thought she could draw and fire before he could reach her, but his one hand caught her wrist before the hand which belonged to it had left its hiding-place. Under that iron gripe the blood stopped coursing through the veins of the captured member, and the fingers of iron seemed to be sinking into the bone. She was too weak to resist and too proud to scream yet she felt more than ever the deadly danger she was in.

Then—from some eyrie not far away—there sounds the crack of a rifle, and the man staggered back, shaking his fingers, till the blood spattered thickly over the body of Miriam's dress. A bullet had all but severed two of his fingers.

As he glared around, uncertain from whence the shot had come, there was a peal of shrill laughter floating down from among the rocks to the right—the rocks which from that spot in the canyon could not be reached.

"Ha, ha, ha! Back there, all of you! Touch the lady again and there will be more than scratched fingers. I can shoot to a hair's breadth, and I'm watching you all. Ha, ha, ha! How you dance; and the music stopped playing long ago. Do you want some more of it? Forward one, or a dozen, and the band strikes up with Crazy Coon for the leader."

Of all the men there only one had ever heard of the crazy youth, but when that one spoke the rest were ready to believe him.

"Slide back, boys," said this one, in a low tone, and swiftly suiting the action to the word.

"It's the lunatic who haunts the Copper Bottom, and he's not lying when he says he can drop anything he gets a bead on. If you can catch a sight of him drop him, but you want to be mighty careful while you are doing it."

In some respects the position of Crazy Coon could not have been better for all parties concerned.

When the first speaker dodged back he went behind the angle of rock which was so convenient; and the rest followed him without hesitation. They had no desire to stand the fire from the batteries of a crazy sharpshooter.

But if Crazy Coon could not get a shot at them, no more could they hope to draw a bead on him; and Miriam, who had fallen back promptly when released, was out of range and reach. Unfortunately, she was not certain which side she would sooner trust, for she remembered her previous meeting with the wanderer, and that at that time he had no particular compunctions about killing a woman.

On the other hand, she did not care to retreat up the canyon, the wall of which seemed to reach higher, and its depths become gloomier, the further she advanced. She crouched closer to the wall of the gorge, as nearly as she could under where Crazy Coon was in hiding as she could locate the spot from the sound of his voice.

The immediate danger had been averted, but how long would she be safe? She certainly did not wish to trust herself to the guidance of the lunatic; and she had already tested these outlaws, and found they were no safe companions. She thought of making her way up toward Dave Brady, but a single glance showed her that she could not reach the only practicable path without putting herself again within reach of the road-agents.

and the only course open for her was to wait for the return of Captain Slyme. She had little faith in him, save as he was controlled by his interests, but she thought she had a hold on him that would be good enough for the present emergency.

While she was considering the silence was broken. Some one else had been thinking.

"Say, miss, kin we have a word with you?"

"A hundred, so they are spoken with proper respect; but I have got my revolver back, and the first man who approaches me after the fashion you did dies. I have used such weapons before, and I know how to hold straight."

"That is all right. We want ter make a fair barg'in. We didn't mean you no harm, but we wanted ter find out sure what war Slyme's game, so we could tell ef he went back on us on ther divvy. If you'll promise not ter mention it we'll treat yer white tell he comes, an' things kin go on same as they war goin'. Ef you don't, we'll hev ter bolt, an' I reckon ther chap up thar'll git away with what's left ov yer."

"I can only speak for myself. The men above are beyond my control, and if they fancy war I cannot call them to peace. But, because I need you, I am willing to remain silent with your captain when he comes provided you furnish me something I can eat. If you can't, I must go a-foraging, and I may forget to come back."

The treaty was soon made, for the men were only too willing to avoid the wrath of their chief. They might have been willing to risk it with the prisoner in hand, and an opening for a deal if the worst came to the worst; but failing in that the time was not yet ripe for mutiny.

After that there was a sort of armed neutrality. Crazy Coon gave no further sign, Dave Brady did not appear, and Slyme was slow in his coming.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TWO VILLAINS TALK.

CAPTAIN SLYME was notorious for carrying through any thing he might undertake in a thorough, business-like way.

He would have been business-like enough if he had simply carried off Miriam in consideration of what Doctor Andrews would pay for the job. The thoroughness of the operation consisted in not only making her a prisoner, but arranging it so he might receive pay from either side, and possibly both, while at the same time he would be, to a certain extent, helping along his own private affairs.

He was in no particular hurry to get back to the young lady, since he believed he had her safely caged; and he had work to do from the other end of the line.

Work it was, too. Many a man would have pounded himself to pieces making the ride the captain did, and it was late in the evening when he got back to the canyon where he had left the detachment who were guarding the rear, and looking after the horses.

He had explained everything as he went along—for he brought the doctor with him—and when darkness came down was ready to start this contingent on the trail of Dave Brady. His idea was to have them fall upon the owner of the Copper Bottom from the rear, while he, and the men he had left with Miriam, engaged his attention in front.

If either party once got within shooting distance, and could gain a parley, there was little danger but what a surrender would follow; but the strongest hope was that the doctor and the men who followed him, would take Brady by surprise.

Altogether it was work of a very ticklish kind he had laid out, because they were liable to come upon Dave anywhere between the two points where he had been keeping guard, and the surprise might work the other way.

Still the possible trail was narrow, and offered little chance for hiding, so that there was not much danger of missing their man. He could follow this course no further than the spot where Miriam and he had lain in wait for him, and the outlaws controlled the only route down to the bed of the canyon. Slyme knew the ground well, and he thought

he had his game in as good a trap as he could wish for.

It was time he was getting back to Miriam, however. The truce between her and the outlaws had been well enough kept, but the men began to grumble at the delay, and there was no telling how soon they would be ready again for mutiny; and another time she would not have Crazy Coon on hand to save her. As it grew dark in the canyon he would no longer be an object of fear to the men who had quailed before the known accuracy of his aim.

It was a great relief to the waiting girl when she heard Slyme's approaching footsteps, and she greeted him with more pleasure than she had ever thought she would take in the appearance of a captain of road-agents.

"Getting nervous, were you?" he asked lightly, as he came into her presence.

"I stayed longer than I intended, but I had to start things going at the other end. If David really intends to show fight, it will make things very sultry unless there is something to divert his attention from the front. As long as his ammunition lasted he could hold that path against a hundred men. We couldn't get up any more than he could get down; but I think I have fixed all that."

"A dozen to one; you must think he is a wonder," answered Miriam, with something like a sneer.

"Were it not that I want to have a word or two with him before he goes I would climb up myself by daylight and pick him off with a rifle."

"Perhaps you would, and perhaps you wouldn't. If things go wrong to-night we'll give you the chance to-morrow. Come now. Everything is ready, and the time has come for us to move. We want to get into position before the moon rises."

There were places in the upward path which had been a hard scramble by daylight, and Miriam would have begged to be excused from passing over them by night had she not been so terribly in earnest. A misstep and a slip would mean a fall, and perhaps serious injury, or death.

Side by side with each other whenever it was possible, the two led the way, and though expecting at every step to be halted by a hail from above they won their way along until, panting and breathless the woman threw herself down on the upper edge of the canyon, which they had reached at length.

Behind them came the rest of the outlaws, and it seemed quite like the presence of an army, lying there.

All was silent, however, and if danger lurked in the shadows they could see no signs of it, nor, for some time, could they hear any sounds whatever, save the breathing of their own men.

Then, at length, they heard advancing steps, which sounded altogether too loud to belong to the wily fugitive of whom they were in pursuit.

"Something wrong," whispered Slyme, who, so far, had kept Miriam close to his elbow.

"I judge those are the rest of the boys, coming to join us. Dave could hardly have found cover, or slipped by them, yet it looks as though he had done one or the other. Remain here a moment while I go to meet them. I may draw a shot as I pass through the open."

The captain crept away, leaving Miriam in hiding. At his movement the advancing party suddenly stopped, and there was a clicking of locks which told how keenly they were on the alert.

A low signal prevented anything like mischief, and a single man came cautiously forward to meet him.

Something in the dim outlines of his figure seemed familiar to Miriam. A suspicion darted through her brain; and without hesitation she determined to verify it. Even more cautiously than Slyme had done she wormed her way toward the two men, the murmur of whose conference was already reaching her ears, though no single word could be distinguished.

Before she had gone far, however, odd words began to be distinguishable, and soon she had gained a position from which she could obtain a fair idea of their conversation, especially as they had raised their voices somewhat.

But the surprising thing to her was that in one of the speakers she recognized Doctor Andrews.

It gave her more than a surprise. She was in bad company herself, but that was not from choice, and though she was making the best of it she cared not how soon she left it.

But there was no doubt the doctor was here of his own free will, and that he was on more than intimate terms with the chief of outlaws. What it meant she did not stop to consider. She was more interested in catching the gist of their conversation.

"Your scheme don't pan out worth a cent," the doctor was saying.

"He may have been here; but it's dead sure he's not here now. He must have got past you somehow, and by this time he's half way across the territory."

"You say. He was up there and there was no way for him to get by, so he must be somewhere in the trap, if we can only find a way to dump him out. There is no use to think of long range firing in the dark; but the boys have orders if they come across him at close quarters to down him and be done with him. His corpse is just as good as we want."

"Yes, so the woman don't understand the orders. And keep her where she will not be apt to get sight of me. It might make things harder. I'm trying fair means first."

"Mighty fair they are," grinned the outlaw, amused in spite of himself.

"If it wasn't your game first, and you an old pard to boot, I don't know but what I'd be willing to try a few of them myself. I'm not sure yet who is the better looking man."

"None of that, Slyme. I've trusted you right along because I knew your word had always been good. If you kicked over the traces, I might not be able to hold you; but you ought to know I'd die mighty game and trying to make my teeth meet. You've seen something of that style in the old time."

"That's all right; as long as you play me fair I'll treat you square, but I'm making all the coin I can out of it, and don't you forget it. I'm as anxious as you are to keep you out of sight of the lady. We have a private bargain betwixt us, and until that is fairly guaranteed I'm in no hurry to deliver my goods."

Miriam cared to wait for nothing further.

The doctor was playing his cards from a stacked pack, and whichever way luck went it was not intended that he should lose. She crept back shivering. Much as she wanted to find Hugh Cathcart she would just then have been willing to forego the chase forever to have been put safely back at the Lion.

The captain had spoken very confidently about the inability of Brady to go further, but she was not so certain.

The wall of rocks rose on upward, seeming to bar progress along the brink of the canyon, but was not there a thread of path along which Dave might have made his escape, and which she might follow? She made up her mind it was worth the trial, and while the two were deep in their conference crept back once more, and passed without question the line of men who still lay where their captain had placed them.

By daylight she had marked this upper region as well as she could.

Beyond the broken face of the canyon wall where they had found difficult footing for their ascent the side was perpendicular, and rose on up into the air a hundred feet or more. And there seemed no other break as far as she could follow the trace line, though, on the other side, the conformation was entirely different. True, the canyon wall was as steep; but once in the upper air and the ground offered no serious obstruction to retreat in any direction. Unfortunately, there seemed no way of reaching that side, from the bed of the canyon, even could she pass the men who lay between her and it.

Eyesight could help her but little, now, for soon she passed within the deepest shadows of the overhanging rocks. The brink of the precipice was perilously near, and, as she felt her way along, her retreat in this direction seemed the height of madness. Slyme had spoken as one who knew, and certainly he was risking much on his knowledge.

Painfully slow was her progress, and every moment added to the chances of the

discovery of her flight, yet she dared not attempt to hasten her speed.

Down below her in the darkness she knew lay the ragged rocks of the canyon, and an unlucky slip, or an incautious movement, meant the agony of falling and the certainty of death.

An age seemed to elapse as she wormed her way along on hands and knees; then, she made a discovery.

The dangerous path she had been following ended here, and she was on a narrow ledge where there was not even room enough to turn around.

But her hand had found out something else.

The butt of a tree rested on the ledge, and the top stretched out toward the opposite side of the canyon.

Did it reach all the way across, and was this the means Dave Brady and his companion had taken to flank their besiegers?

She tested the firmness of its lodgment, and estimated its length from the size of the butt as she felt it. Yes. It might reach across; but at the further side it would be perilously slender.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FALLING.

IF Dave Brady and the girl-woman with him could cross there, Miriam felt she ought to be able to accomplish the feat. She could not, and dared not, go back, or remain, and her only way to advance was by this frail and dangerous route. Without stopping to think whether Brady himself had not dropped in the mad effort to escape, she tested the tree once more, and then crawled cautiously away.

One thing she had noted. Though not felled that day it had been lately cut, and as she crept along its springy length she had no longer doubts of its strength! It had been put there for a purpose, having been dropped, no doubt, from some nook in the rocks above, where it had taken root and grown.

It swayed under her laborious progress, and now and then she had to halt and wait for the motion to cease. She tried to keep from thinking of the awful chasm beneath her, and fought back the dizziness which tried to come over her brain.

In one of those halts she heard sounds in the darkness she had left which made her thankful for the darkness in which she was hidden. Her absence had been discovered, and a search had already begun. There was little time to waste, for she could not doubt they would find her line of retreat before many minutes.

She set her face resolutely toward the further bank, and though the tapering, slender cedar top sprung and bounded beneath her she never allowed herself to fear.

She knew, at last, she could not be far from the goal, but there came a sudden tremor not communicated to the tree by any motion or effort of her own.

In front, all was silence and darkness, but she felt sure some one stood there, tugging at the tremulous bridge, and like a flash divined his intention.

It was the work of a giant, but, as she nerved herself for one despairing effort, she was lifted slowly, and then the whole thing began to slew around.

Silence could no longer serve her, and as she gave a blundering spring, her lips parted in a cry that was strangely choked by terror.

Then, a hand shot out and caught her, dragging her to the solid ground while the loosened tree went crashing down into the chasm.

"Happy Hezekiah, it's a woman!" exclaimed the Kid from Kirby; and that, for the moment, he was astonished went without saying. Until he heard that cry he had not the faintest idea there was a human being on the tree.

The knowledge shook even his stolid nerves, and he trembled slightly as he swung her into safety on the face of the rock behind him.

By the time he had turned he was himself again.

"I reckon ett's ther lady frum ther Lion, turned up jest when I warn't lookin' fur

her most. But it war a clost squeak. You ain't damaged any be you? Speak up, fur I'm a-dyin' ter know."

An inarticulate gurgle was the response. Miriam's heart was in her mouth as all the terrors of that midnight journey through the darkness of death came back to her. She could not have spoken if her life had depended on it.

"I know how yer feels, but thar's no use ter git ther high strikes now, when ther fun's all over. An' ez sure ez yer do them gerloots 'll take ter chuckin' lead along over this way. We'd better slide out afore they ketch on ter which way yer have left."

More by guess than by sight he reached out, and caught her arm with a friendly grasp. She yielded to the pressure, and allowed herself to be silently guided away from the dangerous neighborhood.

When they had gone some little distance they reached the real crown of the bank, and were out of the shadows. The moonlight was bright, and the sheen of the stars sifting down upon them helped to make things visible. Miriam saw a man waiting for them, and he was evidently on guard.

Coming closer he spoke to the Kid, and she recognized him as the Sport from Denver. He recognized her, also, and the sight seemed to bring him satisfaction.

"Good enough, Kid. You wer'n't off a mile when you said we'd find them all in the same box. If your pard had only waited we could have halted right here as well as anywhere. I don't see how the gang could get across to us, but if they did we could keep them mighty busy."

"That's gospel, pard; but unfortunately, Dave didn't wait, an' I ain't stoppin' tell I ketch up with him. I'm afeared he'll keep a-goin' tell he drops. He wa'n't fit ter take sich a trail, an' afore he knows it he'll be all broke up."

"We'll strike him before that. We can't be much behind him, and if the lady—I suppose she intends to go along—can keep up with the procession there is a likely chance of overhauling him soon."

Miriam answered promptly:

"Yes, I will go along. It was to find the man you call Dave Brady, but for whom I have been inquiring under the name of Hugh Cathcart, that I came to this country. It was through my wild willingness to leave no stone unturned to attain the desired end that you find me here."

"That's all right. Dave are kinder moul'tin', an' onder ther weather, er I guess he wouldn't 'a' led yer sich a dance. Ef we kin git thar we'll take yer to him. I dunno what yer wants with him, but I do know thet Dave ain't ary real cause ter be afeared ter meet ary man livin', er woman either. But he may not be jest so easy ter find."

"Just one question, miss," interposed the sport.

"You speak of Dave Brady and Hugh Cathcart being the same person. Are you sure of it? There are some awful queer kinks in life out here, but somehow I can hardly believe it."

"I know I am not mistaken. I thought differently until last night, but then I obtained the proof which could not be disputed."

"Good enough, then. I'll be happy to go along, for I want to see him myself."

Miriam made no answer. She had said all she had in her mind at present to say, and was content to glide along in silence.

The Kid said nothing, but led the way. He did not appear as hopeful as Charlie Turner about finding the fugitive Brady. There were several routes he might take; and if his strength proved equal to his intentions it would not be so easy to catch up, even if they followed the right trail. As yet, Dave had no knowledge they were coming to his aid, and in the darkness he would not know who was behind him. At the first sign of their presence he might take to cover; and there was no dearth of that in these regions.

The men asked Miriam no questions in regard to how she came to be in this wilderness, and she seemed to think the general explanation already given was sufficient. Fully fifteen minutes passed before the silence was broken by Turner.

"You're sure you know where you're going, pard? Blamed if I do."

"I'm sure about whar I'm goin' ter-night, fur ef I don't find Dave when I git thar I'm goin' no funder. I'll camp on ther trail whar I kin do ther most good, an' wait fur Slyme an' his gang. Suthin' tells me they're up ter all ther wrinkles, an' 'll find a way ter git along hyer afore mornin'."

Again they made a yet longer stretch in silence, and then the Kid called a halt while he carefully made an examination for sign.

One of two routes had here been open to the fugitives; and it was important to know which one had been taken, because after passing this point on either course the other could not be reached from it without returning here.

Finally the Kid shook his head gravely.

"I wouldn't 'a' thought he'd 'a' done it, but ez I read sign he's gone down inter ther kenyon. He must 'a' hed a reason fur doin' it, an' I'm beginnin' ter be afeared ez his wound are gittin' ther better ov him. It hez bin a nasty racket fur a man jest outen a bed ov pain."

"Perhaps he counts on their coming up out of the canyon here, while he goes down. That would throw them off the trail."

"Wish I could think so, but I knows better. This hyer are a fork ov ther main gash, an' thar's no connectshun. No; et looks ez though Dave hed jest crawled in hyer ter die an' we wants ter move keerful like. Ef he's off his base a bit he may try all he knows ter take a smart sprinklin' along with him."

"Was he really so badly wounded as all that?" asked Miriam, with something like a shudder in her tones.

"I have suspected that he had been making more of that shot than he would have done had he not known there was one looking for him whom he did not care to meet."

"Dave ain't ther man ter play off," retorted ther Kid, speaking with more coldness than he had yet shown.

"Ef he don't want ter meet you et's more like ter be on your account than hissen; an' ef I didn't think thar hed bin a big mistake somewhar I wouldn't be ther one ter bring yer tergether. I want yer ter see him, though; an' arter that Brady kin say ef he wants ter run er stay. Ef he runs he ain't no more no pard ov mine."

They had lingered a moment while this sort of explanation was going on, but as the Kid turned away after his outburst he made a gesture which commanded silence, and then led the party down the steep incline which only previous knowledge could have told him was a practicable path.

Miriam could see that the Kid looked at her with no great love; but it was different with Charlie Turner. To him, at least, she was a handsome woman, and her position made him feel a sympathy which was rather foreign to his cold-blooded nature. He said nothing, but he accommodated his pace to that of the woman, and was at hand to help her more than once when the way was difficult or dangerous. There was no thrill when their hands met, as they often did, he had no words of encouragement or advice, but before that descent into the bed of the canyon was completed she felt that somehow she had made a friend in whom she could trust.

There were places here where the moonlight fell, broad and full. There were other places, too, where the night was thick with darkness. A hundred men might be lying unseen, yet able, from time to time, to catch a clear view of the little party. It seemed almost like madness to go blundering through nature's gash, guided only by the uncertain remembrances of the man who led them. Once or twice they turned aside from a pitfall which might have slain. To Miriam it was all nearly as dreadful as daylight and the mutineering outlaws.

When she was finding, at last, that it was breaking down her courage, and taxing her strength beyond nature's power of endurance, there was a sudden halt at a gesture and a touch from their leader, who sunk down where the moonbeams were shining the brightest, and a sharp click arose from the darkness beyond, followed by the shrill tones of a girl-woman:

"Halt, you, there! One or a dozen, it makes no difference. Another step and my rifle talks. And when it talks something goes down."

"Frien's, Leetle Mischiff! Frien's fur you an' Dave. Go slow er you'll hev' yer sorrows. You orter know Kirk King when yer hears him talkin'."

The caution came none too soon, for Lill was already aiming at the squatting figure, and she might have pulled trigger had it been delayed for a moment. She recognized the voice, and though she still kept her weapon poised she felt sure there was no mistake.

"If that is you, Kid, come forward with your hands up, till I can see you, sure. Dave is in a mighty bad way, and I've got to hold the ranch all by my lonesome self."

Promptly the Kid stepped forward with his hands up; and doubt was ended as he was welcomed with a joyful cry.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHAT DAYLIGHT BROUGHT.

"HUSH!" exclaimed Lill, after she had led them some little distance.

"I think, maybe, he is asleep, and I tell you, he needs it. He oughtn't to have tried it, and so I told him; but what could I do?"

"You better go ahead, leetle one, an' let him know what's comin'. I don't want ter throw him off his base, er he'll be openin' out on us with his sixes. He wouldn't waste much lead, an' then, whar would we be?"

The caution appeared to be one worth minding, and Lill crept away, and was absent a moment or two, when she returned as silently as she went.

"Follow me, now. You will have a little climbing to do; but that won't hurt. With a gang like this to hold it, I expect a dozen couldn't take the place we have camped in."

They trailed in behind her without a word, and soon saw she had made no empty boast. A cube of rock jutted out from the wall of the canyon, its sides almost perpendicular save for the narrow path which cut down through its upper edge, and along its face.

Along this path they scrambled for well nigh a dozen yards, until they reached its end, to find themselves in a bowl-like excavation, over which jutted the overhanging wall above.

It was almost a cave, and save against a lengthened siege its capacity for defense was almost illimitable. In the rear, already sleeping the sleep of feverish exhaustion, lay Dave Brady.

All this they did not see at once; for though the moonlight in the canyon showed them what they had left behind, about them everything was hidden in thick darkness.

When they had stood there a brief period, listening to the short breathing that told of the presence of the sleeper, Dave moved uneasily, and then awoke.

"Lill!" he exclaimed.

"Where are you?"

"Here, dad. All things are going just right. I am sure we have dodged them for good, and the Kid is coming to see you through if we haven't."

"The Kid! Where is he, Lill? I must see him."

"Right hyer, pard. Ef thar's anything ter start a fire with you shell see me; an' ef thar ain't, you kin git along with ther grip ov me hand. That'll hold yer stiddy while we git things straightened up."

"Lill can find something, can't she? And if she don't—it's nigh to morning, isn't it? It won't be long till we can see. Give me your hand, anyhow."

Straight to the side of his pard the Kid from Kirby glided, and reaching out, felt the hot palm of the other fall into his own. Then, there was a sigh of satisfaction, and both men were silent.

While they communed with their own thoughts there was a rustling near and around them, and after that the striking of a match. Lill had performed her duty as she had heard it and the little blaze which leaped up along the side of the cliff threw its glow upon the faces of the men.

Miriam had halted when the crown of the path had been reached, and had listened like a woman in a dream, to the words of the pards. Now, a cry escaped her lips as she leaned eagerly forward and glared upon the face she had been so long anxious to see.

The sight was more than a surprise, and worse than a simple shock.

"Great heavens!" she muttered; "can that be he? This man is mad!"

She put up one hand to ward away the sight, and reeled backward.

"It is more than I can bear," she muttered, as she stumbled down the path up which she had just climbed with such weary steps, and once in the bed of the canyon set her face firmly in the direction whence she had come.

"Vengeance I would have, but not now, and on such as he is; yet if they find him they will slay him, and he will never know why the lightning struck. He must be himself again before I can see the ax of justice fall. Until that time I would protect him even from myself."

"He looks as though he might have suffered for ages, and the strain at last have been too great for him. If he dies thus vengeance ought to be satisfied."

It was more instinct than reason which brought her safely to the only spot where she could ascend; and it was fortune that is usually classed as blind luck which enabled her to toil to the summit of that wall without a backward slip, or an instant of danger.

She would have thrown herself down, but her work was but half done.

To halt here would be but too plain a guide to those she expected would soon be there.

She resolutely advanced along the trail—or what passed for such, though foot-mark of man or beast there was none. After going some little distance she dropped a handkerchief, which she had been twisting in her hands. It was intended as a plain guide as to the way she went, and as well as she could she left a trail wherever she could find a soft piece of ground.

"If they came before daylight it will all be in vain," she thought.

"I dare not have them find me nearer; they would guess at once. But if they follow me here I may throw them off the trail altogether."

As to her own danger Miriam had little thought. Perhaps she knew in a hazy sort of way that to a certain extent she would be safe so long as Dave Brady lived, but on that she did not greatly count. She had caught a glimpse of a man, haggard, fever-stricken, wild, and at the sight the womanly sympathy in her rose up and conquered what she had all along believed was an undying hate.

Crouching and quivering she tried to wait for daylight; and it came sooner than she expected.

At least, it seemed to. Utterly worn out with mingled emotion and fatigue, she took no note of the passing of time, and if she did not sleep her mind was a blank until certain sounds, such as she had hoped to hear, came to her; and she stared straight up into the face of Captain Slyme.

A little group was huddled in the background; but she had no eyes for them while she was staring eagerly at the captain.

The night had told upon him, too, he looked wearied, and in none of the best of humors.

"What infernal nonsense got into your fool brain to try to give us the slip? After the bargain was made did you think I was going to have any flinching? How did you get here?"

"I followed him," gasped Miriam, still uncertain what she would say, and allowing her lips to fashion the words which seemed to come most patly to them. "But I could not keep up, though I thought, when I heard his voice I could follow him to the end of the earth. I am worn out, and when I sunk down here I thought I was about to die."

It was an explanation no harder to believe than the truth, and Slyme did not altogether doubt it, though he put little faith in anything which could be told for any other reason but the truth.

"You followed him, did you? I suspect you must have done so, and followed pretty close to get away from us. How did you get to this bank of the canyon? I did not believe it possible for any one who did not know our secrets."

"Don't ask me," was her response, given with a shiver.

"They tried to throw me down. On my hands and knees I went across, and when the tree began to start from its moorings I was

going with it. A foot further to go and I would never have seen the morning dawn again."

"Well, you defeated your own ends when you wandered off, since we have spent the most of the night looking for you. Fortunately we could read signs as we went along, and now that we are on our own particular stamping-ground, it will not take long to run him down. If you can go a little further I can furnish you a much better place to rest."

She was really feeling stronger; and the thought that she must keep her wits, and some of her strength, about her, helped her out of her despondency. She arose quickly, and announced she was ready for a journey to the ends of the earth, if it was needed.

The captain did not intend to lose sight of her again, and the caution he gave his men when they had joined him, told that she was more of a prisoner than ever.

The march was on foot, now; but it was not much further continued, and the way led along the brink of the canyon. When, at last, they halted, it appeared to be for a long stay. The men threw down whatever they were carrying save their arms, and she herself was led away, a little to one side.

Little appetite had she for breakfast, and the very thought of the cold coffee offered her from their canteens sickened her.

An exclamation from the captain startled her. He was standing near to the edge of the canyon's bank, and without waiting for reasoning to convince her, she knew the hiding-place of Dave Brady and his companions had been discovered. She would have gone nearer, but was sternly warned back.

Seeing it was needless to attempt getting nearer she listened with intense eagerness. What would be the next move on the carpet?

Slyme gave his orders in a low tone, for his excitement lasted only a moment.

In haste several men took their position at some distance along the canyon, peering over the wall, into the gulf below.

Several others took their stand by the side of the captain. All of them had Winchesters in their hands, and with thumb on hammer and finger to trigger were ready to shoot at an instant's notice.

"It was only a chance which did all this. The Kid from Kirby had advanced just within range of vision from the overhanging rocks, and was staring wistfully down the gulch. It was not carelessness so much as a miscalculation, for he had thought himself screened from the keenest eyes. Then, he heard the voice of Captain Slyme:

"Ho, you, down there! This time we have you in a box. Surrender, or die!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE LIGHTING OF THE FUSE.

THE disappearance of the man below was instantaneous.

He did not wait to hear the finish of the challenge, because the moment he heard a voice he knew what it meant, and without hesitation threw himself backward, his heels twinkling an instant in the air as he rolled over.

Swiftly as he had acted his wits were all about him, and as he sprung up, well under cover of the rocks, he whipped out his pistol to be ready for what should come next.

He remained silent, however, and after a single anxious glance at the spot where Dave lay sleeping, with Lill hanging over him, he stared out gulchward, waiting for the next move in the game. Captain Slyme had located them, and the sooner his intentions were developed the sooner the Kid would know the nature of the work that was cut out for him.

"It's no use," came the voice again.

"We have you in a hole and if we say so there is no way to get out except feet first. You may as well come while the door is open."

"Ef we can't git out you can't git in; so there, now. We have grub for a week, and there's a spring of water right hyer, so, we are ready fur a siege. Ef you can't show it 'll pay ter throw up our han's, down they'll stay tell we git ready ter raise 'em with sixes in 'em. You better 'tend ter yer own knittin', an' we'll look arter ourn."

"That's the platform we are on. You

folks down there are our meat, and we mean to have you. You can tell the gentle David, the law is reaching for him, and we are its humble ministers."

"Men, angels, ner ther law kin have him tell I say so, an' by that time he'll be able ter talk fur hisself. Ef yer ain't got nothin' better to say, dry up, an' let us alone."

"We'll do the first pretty soon if you don't hark to reason, but as for the latter—when you are dead and buried will be time enough to think of that. Last words, now. I've nothing much in for you, but the gent who goes by the name of Brady I want, and if we find Short Card Charlie there I'll have a thing or two to say to him on his own personal account. You think you are safe there till you can wear us out; but that is just where you are going to be left. We may not be able to drag you out without losing more good men than I care to spare, but there are other ways to fix you."

"Try 'em, pard; try 'em!"

"Why, blast you! sooner than miss I'd roll rocks down there till I filled that canyon even full. But there's a shorter way than that. We've gunpowder hereabouts in plenty, and we'll drop a few barrels over with a fuse all lit and fizzing. You can have just thirty minutes to chew that over. Then, if you don't come out, with hands up, we'll strike you where you live. I might let you off, and see Dave Brady go clear; but I'll never lose the chance to take in Charlie Turner. So-long till we see you later."

The Kid said nothing, but turned to look once more at his pard.

As he did so he saw Lill quietly stealing away. He called to her in a low tone to keep under cover, but she held up her hand and waved him back, while she muttered:

"He saved my life. I told him I'd fight for him and I mean to do it."

In her hand she carried a rope which Dave had brought with him. The middle of this she slung around a rock which offered itself for the very use she needed, and tossed the two ends down, so that they almost reached the level of the canyon. Then, she slid down the doubled rope, drew it after her, and carrying it coiled in her hand stole along the base of the wall, all the time keeping herself well concealed from the view of those overhead.

Before she had gone a hundred yards she stopped suddenly and looked upward. Then, she flung the coiled rope, making a cast which astonished the Kid; who was still more surprised when he noted that one end of it appeared to be caught from somewhere above. Without hesitation she swung herself from the ground, and began the ascent, hand over hand.

He stared at her, and muttered:

"I orter hev stopped her, but how could I an' not leave pard? That's some 'un up thar hez made mo'shuns to her, an' she's a-trustin' him. Ef ett's Crazy Coon I reckon he kin help her ez much ez ary one ez long ez he totes fair, but what does ther gal expecter do? A loonytick an' a child ter fight our battles, an' me an' Dave cooped hyer whar we kin only wait ter die. We might crawl out same way ez Mischi'f did ef he war fit ter travel, but we couldn't go fur till we'd git inter range ag'in. Wonder jest what Slyme means ter do, an' ef he's ez bad es his rep'ertashun."

Lill had swung herself out of sight, and Dave was calling for her. The Kid went to his side and soothed him with low words. He had time for that now, but he was afraid he might not have later on. Charlie Turner was not there, in spite of the suspicion of Slyme, Dave was worse than no one, and Kirk King was alone to defend the fort.

Captain Slyme was making no idle threat when he gave dis ultimatum. He knew the sort of man he had to deal with, and he meant every word he said.

His sharp-shooters were left on guard, but he turned to several of the men who were near at hand, and gave a few orders which were immediately obeyed.

Up to this time, though Miriam felt she was a prisoner, nothing had been said directly to her, that might convey the idea. She had simply been treated like a lost wanderer who had been found.

At least, so it was in an earance, though she might have suspected that one of the

men who was constantly near had received his orders, and that he was in fact her jailer. Now, two of the outlaws approached.

"Sorry, miss, but it looks as though there was going to be a sultry time around here, and the captain thinks you had better be out of the way of anything like harm. It'll may go right, but till we are sure of it you had better be where it is safer, and you are to go along with us. The distance is not great, and you will know almost at once if anything happens."

The fellow was politeness itself, and there seemed nothing to do but to accept the invitation. Resistance there would be useless: while escape might not be altogether impossible if she could separate from the main force.

"I am willing to do as the captain thinks best, but I hope I will not have far to go. I am very tired."

She spoke quietly, and without concern. Whether she deceived the man or not her ready assent was evidently gratifying, and with a word or two of encouragement he led the way.

Their course turned away from the canyon, toward the still higher ground which lay to the right, and it did not take them long to come to the present end of her journey.

She could not help but look around with some degree of curiosity. The place looked like a mining site, though there was no sign of any one at work. There was a cabin against the hillside, and broken rock, and scattered debris, which told of an excavation somewhere near, though the exact spot might be concealed.

The outlaw who had been her guide appeared to think some explanation necessary. He waved his hand at the indications around.

"These don't count," he said, with an unmistakable accent of regret.

"There has been a heap sight honest work wasted, but it turned out to be barren rock, after all. Still we would a little sooner no one knew of it, and first off the captain didn't mean any one of our visitors to see it. If they went back and told what they had seen there is no telling how many fools there would be to join a rush; and that would be uncomfortable. We don't yearn for neighbors. Guess he means to swear you in when you go."

"Fear nothing," answered Miriam, as lightly as she could.

"Once away from here, and all connected with it will be a nightmare dream I will only strive to forget. Let me rest now or I will die."

"Rest you shall. Here's the shanty, and there's a decent bunk or two in it. No one is going to intrude, but I may as well tell you there is always a man outside on the watch. If he saw you moving away without orders he would be apt to shoot. You sabbe?"

"I understand; but if my life depended on it I would not think of movement."

"So you think," said the man, doubtfully, but he saw that she staggered as she spoke. She had undergone enough physical toil to break up the average woman, to say nothing of her mental exhaustion.

Several men who entered the cabin behind them said nothing, but went to the great chest at one end of the room, and Minerva was at least wise enough to know they were handling explosives when they sorted out the nitro and the powder which it contained.

She watched them go away with their loads, but said nothing. This thing had gone beyond her, and she was hardly surprised when she found her sympathies veering to the other side.

Slyme knew what he was doing, or, at least, thought he did, when he sent Miriam away. She might be willing to pay for work which she had not watched, that would shock her beyond pardon could she see it as it was.

The moments of grace had expired, and the captain had found time to make his preparations, but still there was no sign from below. Kirk King was bending over his pard with an anxious look in his eyes, and without a thought of surrender in his brain. He scarcely looked up when once more came the voice from above.

"You, down there. Have you made up

your minds? because if you haven't, we have. And there is just a little sample of what will be dropping after, to blow you all to kingdom come.

With its short fuse hissing and spitting viciously, a cracker came whizzing down, and so nicely timed was it that it exploded with a great report as it struck the ground.

The Kid never winced, but Dave Brady, as he heard the sound started up, grasping for his pistols.

"Hold them level, pard!" he shouted, shrilly.

"They are after the mine but they sha'n't take the Copper Bottom while we live. It's my last throw, and if fate plays me false again I'll go out of the wet trying to hold it."

His voice never reached the canyon's edge above, where Captain Slyme was bending over, peering downward for signs of occupancy or surrender.

"Yes, or no, Kid?" he shouted for the last time.

"You ought to know I would never think of a pure bluff game with you. You can have your choice. Surrender or we commence the good work."

"Let her roll!" yelled back the Kid, hoarsely, as with one arm around the shoulder of his pard he tried to soothe him back to the sheltered spot where there might be at least a chance for life.

"But sooner er later I'll hev a bead on you; an' that'll mean death."

The sharpshooters were waiting for their game, should he come forward, and the captain tested the fuse to the immense bomb he had fashioned from one of the powder kegs. Then, he lit the match, and they stepped toward the escarpment.

And at that moment, from over the ledge, right where she had worked her way upward by the help of the ape-like Crazy Coon, bounded Little Mischief.

She came, breathless with her toil, silent as a ghost, and all unseen until she sprang in front of the captain with outstretched hands that each grasped a pistol.

"Back!" she shouted. "I want no blood on my hands, but he saved my life, and I swore I would die for him if needs be. Back, or perish!"

Captain Slyme gave one look, and then a great cry. He tore off the sputtering fuse from the bomb which in another second would have been tossed, and then stood silent and white, though not from fear. Lill, too, had suddenly grown ghastly, and with wide open eyes they stared at each other.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

ALONE in the cabin, Miriam sunk back, too full of thoughts to rest, and yet too tired to think. A numbness was creeping over her, body and mind, and the near-by report of a pistol hardly startled her. When a man bounded into the cabin she scarcely looked up till she heard a glad cry of joy, and a caressing hand fall upon her shoulder.

"I have found you, Miriam!" he exclaimed, raising her gently as he spoke.

"It was a blessed chance put me on the trail, and, thank Heaven! I am here, just in the nick of time. Have you strength to make one effort? If not, I will die with you."

Her wit and wisdom came back to her like a flash, and she tried to wrench herself from his arms.

"You villain! Do you think I do not know you as you are? Hands off, sir! You are falsier than the man I thought I hated, and more cruel than the wolves outside. I heard your conversation with the outlaw when you were searching for Dave Brady, and I know enough of the nature of your bargain. I would sooner be Captain Slyme's prisoner than walk a mile in freedom with you."

It might have been better to gain her freedom first and talk her mind out afterward. The gripe of the doctor tightened, and his beaming face grew dark.

"Ah! You know all that? Then you must know that Slyme is my friend, and you are as much in my hands as his. Reserve to the winds! I have you where I want you, and I'll bend your stubborn spirit, or I'll break it."

"Never!" she cried, striving to break away, and as she struggled to do so a

man leaped through the doorway of the cabin, and struck as hard as he knew how at the head of the doctor.

Andrews went down, and Miriam, without waiting to see who had come to her rescue, bounded through the open door. Her lassitude was gone, and she was flying blindly toward the outlaws at the canyon.

That one blow knocked Andrews senseless for the moment, and the man who gave it was the Sport from Denver.

He lingered only long enough to think he saw that his work needed no repeating, and then hurried out to join the young lady. Had he come in time he would have led her in a different direction; but seeing her flitting form in the distance he followed after. He was no great distance behind when she came upon the tableau at the canyon's edge, and when she suddenly halted he drew nearer.

He had his pistols, and a trifle the advantage in the ground. As he then felt he would not have gone far out in his way to avoid a dozen outlaws provided he could start fair with them.

Yet, he halted at Miriam's side, for just then he heard from Slyme's lips the exclamation:

"Great heavens, is it you, Lily? Can it be possible you are still alive?"

Lill came forward a step or two until she could place a hand on the captain's shoulder. It was certainly flesh and blood she touched, and she stared more confidently into the eyes she could so well remember.

The tableau interested Short Card Charlie, though he took time to glance aside at a form which stole along at a little distance. It was the crouching figure of Crazy Coon, and he was going in the direction of the cabin.

"And they told me you were dead and buried," she said, softly.

"Surely, they did not lie to me on purpose. Dave would not have done that. It was he who nursed me back to life, kind as a woman, and there were tears in his eyes as he said it. And he burdened himself with little, worthless me, and turned back from what he hoped would be a fortune because he couldn't leave me in the poor family which was the only place he could find for me. Dave Brady never knew, I am sure of that."

The arms of the outlaw went around the one thing he had ever cared for much in this world.

"It was no lie he told you, for there were many who made the same mistake. A few friends carried me away to bury me, and when they found I was living they took me further to the hills. And when I came to enough to tell them of the little girl I had left out in the cabin under the pines, who I thought would die without my care, they went there, and came back empty-handed. They were sure she had died, for there was little chance of the lonely spot having visitors, or of your having had strength to find help. And Dave Brady saved your life?"

"He did indeed, just when I was starving. I'm not sure whether I wasn't partly dead, already. You and he are friends, now, ain't you?"

"Yes, by heavens, we are friends! I have bargained with a woman to bring her face to face with him, and that bargain I'll keep, for the man who saved my little girl can't have a bad streak in him; but I'll round up on the cursed doctor. He is at the bottom of the trouble. Now that I've got you back again I can forgive even Short Card Charlie, and the whole gang of your friends can go home rejoicing."

"Give me your hand on that, dad!" exclaimed the girl, partly drawing herself from his arms; and he grasped her offered palm with a hearty clasp.

Then she broke away from him altogether, and ran to the brink.

"Hello, down there, you Kid! Do you believe in me?"

"Ef it's Leetle Mischief that's talkin' I should say you war a girl ter tie to," came back the prompt answer. Dave was once more quiet, and he had been listening for sounds from above, and wondering why the attack had been so long delayed.

"Then let your old bones rest easy, and tell the good news to Dave, if he can bear it. I've got this thing all fixed up straight as a

string. This is my old dad up here, and I want him to see what he can do for my new one."

"Are that gospel?" queried the Kid, who felt relieved, and never was astounded by anything.

"Gospel according to Saint Lill, and she never lies."

"Then hustle down hyer soon ez you kin fur he needs yer awful bad."

"Hands off everybody, boys!" exclaimed Slyme, turning to his men.

"Your coin will come in all the same, but just now I'm going to go to see what I can do for the man who saved my little girl's life. If she had stayed down there—great heavens! I would have murdered her myself."

He shouted down a word or two confirmatory, and then, without waiting for further parley with the Kid, he took Lill's hand in his, and moved away. He was bent on reaching the bottom of the canyon, but not along the route by which Lill had come. He shuddered when he thought of that.

Miriam had kept in the background; but she was not far distant, and when Slyme started off with the avowed determination of seeking Dave Brady, she followed; and Charlie Turner went with her. Not a word had passed between the two, and the woman appeared oblivious of the presence of her companion; but from time to time the sport eyed her curiously, and once or twice was about to speak. Her newly-found strength did not desert her, but had it done so she had help all the time at her elbow, ready to offer itself as soon as needed.

Half an hour was lost making the journey. Then Captain Slyme and his daughter were at the side of Dave Brady; the Kid from Kirby was standing nigh, a smile on his face but his hands near his revolvers, while, in the background, and a little apart from each other, were Miriam, and the Sport from Denver.

Dave was better again, and he understood what the outlaw captain was saying, yet his eyes roved beyond and rested for a moment, not on Miriam, but on Short Card Charlie.

He gave a start, his eyes dilated, his lips moved, as he beckoned:

"Can the dead be alive? You—you are Charlie Parkhurst! Great heavens, pard!"

"That's what they name it, old man," said the Sport from Denver, coming forward.

"Don't get weak on the strength of it, for I'm the pure flesh and blood. Ah!"

He grasped the hand of the man known as Dave Brady, but he looked back over his shoulder in time to see Miriam faint and fall; and with a bound was by her to raise her up.

"Who in heavens is she?" asked Slyme, who seemed for the first time to be aware of her presence.

"I've been suspecting for the last hour or so," exclaimed the Sport from Denver, "she was my sister—and now I'm pretty sure of it, though small blame to us both if we didn't recognize each other sooner. I ran away from home when I was a kid, and we haven't seen each other since."

"And she was my wife though the world knew nothing of the secret marriage. I left her to come West and make a fortune," groaned Dave.

"I knew nothing of her brother, and when I came across him under an assumed name I cared for him for himself alone. Yet, she believed I killed him! She wrote me that he had been murdered by a man with whom he had been working, and asked me to hunt the wretch out for justice, threatening in case I refused she would one day do the work herself, and never recognize me afterward. After that, how could I bear to face her without the impossible proofs of my innocence. Had she met me a week ago she would have slain me."

"Never that, Hugh; never that. But when you failed to defend yourself, how could I be blamed for doubting?"

A thin voice piped the words, and Miriam, wresting herself from her brother's arms, dragged herself slowly to the side of the wounded, and perhaps dying man.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE HOME RUN.

AFTER that Dave Brady—or, rather, Hugh Cathcart, since under his true name he was henceforth to be known—did not die.

There was something to be pardoned on both sides, between husband and wife, but they got bravely over that. Tender nursing by a handsome woman can do a great deal with a sick man, and for some days it was uncertain whether Hugh Cathcart was to live or die.

It happened, too, they were left a good deal to their own devices. Lill, strange as it might seem, was not too much horrified over the evident outlawry of her father to take great delight in the reunion, while he was taking a strange comfort in her society, though all the time an idea was working in his brain. Miriam had taken occasion to explain to him that she was more than able to keep her promises to him, and vowed that she would.

He had looked for Doctor Andrews, under the hope that he might be forced to use some of his undeniable skill for the benefit of the wounded man; but the doctor was dead with a knife wound in his heart.

The Sport from Denver was the only one who suspected that the doctor was the man who had slain the father of Crazy Coon, and that the lunatic had taken his vengeance when he found him. Afterward, that was found to be the case, but by that time it made no racket, and Hugh Cathcart provided for him, as he said he would, out of the Copper Bottom Mine.

"Et's all fu'st class, no doubt," thought the Kid from Derby, watching husband and wife growing more and more together.

"Ef I war them I'd do jest so, but I reckon Dave are outen danger, an' et are time some 'un looked arter ther mine. Sence Slyme hev give us ther cabin, an' left us purty much ter our own selves he don't seem sich a bad feller, but blamed ef I like this picnicking with a road-agent, ef he be Little Mischief's dad. Et's time I war workin' in to'rads Boot Jack. Fu'st thing yer know Johnny Seams 'll be jumpin' ther Copper Bottom on his own account."

Having once got the idea into his head the Kid proceeded to announce his intentions, and, somewhat to his surprise, Slyme offered no objections, while he seemed rather glad to have the Sport from Denver depart.

"For the sake of Lill, and the man who saved her life, I'm overlooking the fact that I once had a rustle with Short Card Charlie, but I'm just human enough not to have altogether forgotten it. For fear we might start fresh and fare worse I would just as soon he was at a distance. You understand, I am trusting both of you with my life; but then, I know you are white from the ground up."

"Perhaps ther trust ain't all on one side," was the answer of the Kid.

"Ef we tried ter work roots on you I'm afear'd yer nat'ral love an' affeckshun wouldn't be ernough ter save my pard an' his wife."

"But, ye'r' right 'bout one thing. We're both white, an' you kin sleep easy."

The next morning they started.

They got to the Copper Bottom all right, and found the mine unjumped, and Johnny Seams still on guard, but he had not been altogether without his alarms.

"A lot ov tough citizens came out from Boot Jack," he explained, "an' made as though they war goin' ter jump ther lay-out whether er not, but Vance Ullman he came out, too, an' brung his double-barrel shot gun along, an' swore he'd salivate ther fu'st man ez broke ther peace, and that settled them. Doc warn't thar to egg them on, an' they jest naturally wilted."

After that, things had been moving along all right, and the Kid, after explaining that his pard had been sick, but would be along in a few days, paid up a week's wages, and went off to town, the Sport from Denver going along. King wanted to see Vance Ullman; and the saloon-keeper was not hard to find.

"Dog-gone ye!" exclaimed the Kid, as he held out his hand to the proprietor of the Tiger.

"I bin a-wonderin' why you war sorter chippin' in on our side ov ther pile, an' now, sence Charlie hez bin givin' me a wrinkle, I know. You'r' Hart Thorne. Ett's jest amazin' thet me mother's eldest didn't know yer sooner, but so it war."

"Oh, it's nothing surprising," answered

the other, cordially. "I shaved my face, changed my name, painted my hair and talked like another man. Dave never came into the Tiger, and when you didn't recognize me at first sight it wasn't likely you'd think of it later on. For old times' sake I gave you as fair a shake as you deserved, and if you don't believe I love you both as well as ever, bring Dave along and you'll soon see."

"Dave hez bin onder ther weather, but I'll fetch him to yer in a few days, fine ez a fiddle. He's jest bin j'ined by his wife, which war ther likely lookin' female ez war lately at the Lion, axin' 'round fur Hugh Cathcart. Lucky she didn't know ther name yer used ter kerry, fur she thought Hart Thorne war ther man, an' jest then she wardown on him like a thousand ov brick, though that's all straight now."

"Lucky she didn't find me, sure enough. You didn't see any thing of Doc Andrews, did you? He's jumped the burg and left a lot of anxious mourners wondering where he has gone to."

"Guess he heard a sheriff was comin'," was the careless answer.

"I'll tell you later on ef I git ary news."

So, in course of time Miriam got back to the Lion, and Dave Brady came with her. It was understood he was the man she had been seeking as Hugh Cathcart, but not much was said about that, and one name in Boot Jack was as good as another.

They remained long enough to arrange the affairs of the Copper Bottom, and then went East. Miriam had a fortune, now, in her own right, and wanted a husband back where it was, to look after her and it.

Temporarily, Lill disappeared; and about the same time Captain Slyme—or Grant Thorne—was heard of no longer on the trails. Whether the love for his recovered daughter would work true repentance and a change of heart was a question Lill's other dad was slow about answering, but he was willing for the sake of the girl whom he had really learned to love almost like his own child, that the trial should be made.

With his half of the money promised by Miriam they slipped off to the States, and as Little Mischief was looking fairly radiant when she next met Hugh Cathcart and wife, the experiment was probably that far successful.

The Copper Bottom went into the hands of a company, and Kirk King went with it as manager, and half-owner.

Short Card Charlie, the Sport from Denver, was included in the bequest which had enriched his sister, and gave up the profession which for some years he had been following with varied success. As he gambles in stocks now, perhaps he has not changed so much in principle, but the life he leads is certainly less dangerous than that of the older time.

Manuel recovered, Tomasso got well, Vance Ullman continued to run the Tiger, and the rest of the characters either died or continued to live, and that brings the reader fairly to,

THE END.

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